

SERMON “You, Who Do You Say that I Am?”
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09/12/2021

SCRIPTURE: Mark 8: 27-38

Peter’s Declaration about Jesus

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’²⁸ And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’²⁹ He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, * will save it.³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words * in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.’

Sermon “You, Who Do You Say that I Am?”

I was never good at geometry. I took it in high school and did not do well on the final. But I did pass the course. That meant I went on the trigonometry the next fall. Well, the first unit was a review of geometry. And my geometry ability didn’t miraculously improve over the summer. But I aced that unit exam – a multiple choice test. There were questions that I was not sure about. But I noticed that the letter choices for the answers, were not limited to a, b, c, and d. There were other letters. And when I looked at the letters for the answers I knew, I noticed

they were spelling out words. So I filled in the remaining answers with letters to spell those words. I ended up getting all the answers right. But I really did not really grasp geometry.

Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do the people say that I am?" They answered that the people thought Jesus could be Elijah or John the Baptist. Then Jesus asked them, "who do you say that I am?" Peter answered correctly, "You are the Messiah." Peter had the right answer, but he did not really grasp what that meant.

Peter had seen Jesus do miraculous things. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus had healed a man with an unclean spirit, a leper, a paralyzed man, a man with a withered hand, and countless others. He had even healed the daughter of a Syrophenician woman, a child who had been possessed by a demon. Jesus miraculously healed her without even being in the same house. Jesus had fed those who came to hear him speak, five thousand one time and four thousand another. And Jesus had walked on water.

And in the midst of all those miraculous deeds, Jesus was preaching and teaching. He had confronted religious authorities, teaching them about the place of the Law. Jesus made it clear that it is the underlying essence that gives the law its purpose – love - to love God above all and to love one's neighbor as oneself.

Jesus actions had added up to Messiah. It was like my geometry test. I understood that the multiple choice letters spelled out words, so I had the correct answer. But I did not have a true grasp of geometry. Peter got it right that Jesus was the Messiah but did not grasp what being the Messiah meant to Jesus.

To Peter, the Messiah was the one heralded by the prophets of old, the one who was to save the Jews, who would rescue them from oppression, who would restore God's kingdom. But Peter's understanding of Messiah, or I should say his understanding of the role of the Messiah and Jesus' understanding were not the same.

Jesus explained that the Messiah had to suffer, be rejected by the religious authorities, be killed, die and rise after three days. As you know, Peter could not accept Jesus' version of Messiah. Peter even drew Jesus aside to "rebuke him."

So Jesus set Peter straight, Peter and all the disciples. Though I think Jesus actually came down pretty hard on Peter when he told him to "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." Calling Peter "Satan" is a pretty strong rebuke. But Jesus meant business.

Peter understood Jesus to be the Messiah because he saw Jesus' healing power and the power of his words. But Jesus wanted Peter to understand that he was not the Messiah who was about overcoming power with power. Rather he was about using power for service, with sacrifice, and setting one's sight on divine things. And what might divine things be? Jesus was focused on the love of God; God's love for his people, and living a life based in love.

Peter may not have understood this at the time. But I believe he understood it more at the Last Supper, when Jesus became the servant who got down on his hands and knees washed his disciples' feet and then instructed them to follow his example. I believe Peter understood better when Jesus said, "Father, forgive them..." as he was dying on the cross and when Jesus appeared to the disciples after his death on the cross, overcoming the power of death through resurrection. And I believe as Peter engaged in his own ministry, leading the early followers of Jesus, that his understanding of Jesus and carrying his cross continued to grow.

A few weeks ago we shared Jesus' "I Am" statements, images Jesus gave his friends in John's Gospel. I am the Light of the World, the true Vine, the Good Shepherd, the Bread of Life, the Way, the Truth, and the Life and the Resurrection and the Life. He told his disciples that he called them friends, so we can call him Friend. His friends called him Teacher. Jesus is also called Prince of Peace, Lamb of God, Son of Man, Living Water, The Beloved, and Savior. And there are other names which convey wonderful images that can guide our lives through metaphors of Jesus leading or accompanying us.

But in our reading today, Jesus wanted to be clear that following him entailed sacrifice. Jesus warned his friends that he would experience emotional and physical suffering. But he would not use his power to avoid this suffering. Rather Jesus, the Messiah, was willing to suffer and die, with his eyes all the while on the divine – on God and God's plan. And then Jesus would rise.

As followers of Jesus, we may turn to those comforting "I Am" images or special names of Jesus to sustain us or guide us through difficulties, challenges, and suffering. But Jesus reminds us that following him will require us to carry crosses and make sacrifices.

We can see examples of sacrifice when we look around us; those who make sacrifices for the good of others. In the midst of natural disasters, in the midst of the pandemic and as we remember the events of 9/11, we think about men and women who go into harm's way. We especially think of those who made the ultimate sacrifice - losing their lives to save others.

But people make sacrifices in other ways, with a focus on the divine – living the way of love. They volunteer at soup kitchens, homeless shelters, as tutors, or Sunday School teachers, giving up their time and sharing their talents. They donate money to causes that they believe will benefit those who struggle, money they might have used to buy something for themselves. They interrupt their lives to hear the stories of others and find ways support others in their struggle.

Recently, I heard the story of a lacrosse team made up of kids from Bridgeport. Their coach told me that when his team showed up to play against suburban teams, their opponents would be surprised. He would have a conversation that went like this. Someone would say to him, "Black kids play lacrosse?" He would say, "Yes, and they're from Bridgeport." Then that person would say, "Kids from Bridgeport play lacrosse?" And he would say, "Yes, you'll see." Then the team of Black kids from Bridgeport would win. And that person, along with the suburban team would be surprised. This man and his team are dispelling people's preconceived notions about Black kids and inner city kids, ideas that stem from racism that those individuals are not even

aware of. That coach has other dreams for other kids from the city, programs that will provide opportunities for kids to envision and work towards a better future for themselves. And we are supporting this coach and these kids as they practice in Olivet's gym. Perhaps may someday we may be able to support those other programs that lift them up and enable them to make dreams a reality. Something to celebrate.

Throughout our lives, we are all given opportunities to serve others, keeping our focus on the divine. Some of those opportunities involve doing, some involve supporting and some involve more sacrifice than others. That's part of following the example of Jesus, the cost and joy of discipleship.

Jesus asked his disciples "Who do you say that I am?" What if Jesus were to ask you, "Who do you say I am?" How would you reply? And what has that meant to you in your life and what does that mean to you now?

When I was in high school, I figured out the right answers for my geometry test. But in my life I have not tried to understand geometry. As a child, I learned about Jesus. Throughout my life, I have tried to learn more about Jesus and to better understand how Jesus calls me to live in his love and how to truly love Jesus and others. For me, it's a process that I expect will take a lifetime.

How about you?