

“Back to Basics: Who is Jesus?”

Mark 8:27-33

January 17, 2021

Leadership has been on my mind this week—the characteristics of excellent leadership and the traits of faithful leaders. If you are interested in the topic, there is an abundance of material out there—books, lectures, seminars, and conferences promoting the latest strategy or the newest perspective. You can learn the secrets of leadership from entrepreneurs, sports legends, politicians, scholars, rock stars, CEOs, and, of course, preachers. We seem to know intuitively and through experience, the importance of leaders who inspire, encourage, and challenge us. It’s a popular subject—how to be a leader.

The opposite could be said about how to be a *follower*. It’s hard to find a book that takes up that question. Not many conferences are offered on the art of following. We’re rarely instructed to develop our followership skills. I’m not aware of any lists of the world’s greatest followers or top tips on how to follow.

That’s a shame because the truth is we are all followers. Despite our cultural obsession with novelty, originality, and uniqueness, each of us is inevitably molded by a variety of influential people, events, and experiences. When we acknowledge this reality, when we are aware that we all follow, we can be more intentional and thoughtful about who and what we follow. We can more carefully choose the values and ideas, the people, and perspectives that will shape our perspective and influence our lives. We can be faithful followers.

This morning’s gospel passage is a critical moment of decision for the original followers of Jesus. It represents their opportunity to make this choice. They are not without adequate information. This crew of twelve has been with Jesus for a while now. The disciples have witnessed miraculous healings

and dramatic feedings and listened to spellbinding sermons and perplexing parables. They have watched his influence and following grow; they have had front row seats to the controversy surrounding this man whom some called prophet, some Messiah, some revolutionary hero, and some blasphemous heretic.

So here, at the exact midway point of Mark’s gospel, Jesus turns to the disciples on the road with two key questions. The first is merely descriptive. Who do people say that I am? What have you heard on the street and in the fields about me? Well, the disciples have some good answers; they’ve been listening to the growing crowds surrounding Jesus and they repeat the suggestions they’ve heard. They name both Elijah and John the Baptist, two odd individuals who were believed to be precursors to the Messiah. They also indicate that many think Jesus is a prophet, following in the tradition of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, or Micah. The disciples pass this first test with flying colors. This is what others have been saying about their leader; this is what the public opinion polls show.

But Jesus is not finished with them yet. The next question goes far deeper and more personal; it moves from description to confession. Who do you say that I am? It’s a question of discipleship.

Who is Jesus Christ to us? What differences does he make? Of course, we live in a time when this question is answered in radically divergent ways; when some who profess faith in Jesus use that faith as a weapon of abuse, a sign of supremacy, a fortress of isolation, or a license to judge. We live in a time when some of the most amplified voices proclaim a Jesus I find nowhere in the pages of Scripture—an idol constructed to sanction worldly desire for

power. Now, more than perhaps any time since the early Christian movement, we must have a clear and compelling answer to the question of who Jesus is. We must move beyond the dispassionate descriptions of the merely historical Jesus that have captivated the mainline denominations in recent descriptions. Equally, we must move beyond a dispassionate depiction of Jesus more suited for bumper stickers and key-chains than life-changing discipleship. We must break the chains of lukewarm faith enabled by the indifference afforded by comfort or fear. While we have tended to institutional maintenance and survey-taking, our witness to the world has been diminished and diluted. Jesus asks, then as now, “Who do you say that I am?”

Well, Peter is, as usual, the bravest and boldest of the disciples and he responds with immediate certainty: “You are the Messiah.” As a theological description, the answer is spot-on. Peter has hit the bulls-eye. And yet, there is something missing. We know this because the rest of the story is so odd, so counter-intuitive. Instead of congratulating Peter on an astute answer, Jesus silences him, then begins to predict his own suffering, death, and resurrection. The juxtaposition is one of the oddest in all of Scripture. Peter confesses his faith in Jesus as Messiah, and Jesus responds with ominous words of pain and rejection, and death.

It is as if the gospel-writer Mark wants to communicate two things at once: yes, Peter is right: Jesus is the Messiah. But he is not the Messiah that Peter expects or desires. The path of this Messiah will not lead to imperial power or political victory but to the hill called Golgotha, the place of the skull. Peter is dumbfounded. In self-protection, he tries to silence Jesus, but Jesus will not allow it; instead, after scolding Peter, he turns to the crowds that surround him and he issues a challenge, “if you want to be my followers, deny yourselves, take up your cross, and follow me.”

The message is clear. It is not enough to confess Jesus as Messiah in some generic or aloof way. We

do not have the option of creating Jesus in our own image. We are followers and our call is to *this* Messiah. The one who challenges our deepest allegiances and demands faithful discipleship. The one who requires us to move from selfishness to generosity, from fear to love, from hatred to compassion, from the narrowness of self-righteousness to the wideness of mercy. The one whose journey, like ours, will include suffering and pain and rejection. If we want to follow this Messiah, it’s going to take more than mere acceptance and assent, more than empty words or good feelings. It’s going to require changes in habits and assumptions and actions, it’s going to require discipleship.

In his classic book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer contrasted cheap and costly grace. The difference? Discipleship. Cheap grace, Bonhoeffer wrote, “Is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ.” On the other hand, “costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to follow Jesus.”ⁱ

When Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” he is not expecting a new comprehensive affirmation of faith. He is not asking for a metaphysical interpretation of the incarnation or biographical accounts of his human life. He is not asking for the right answer. As one preacher has written, “The invitation is not to write a thesis but to trust him, to bet everything on him. It means to consider the proposal that he is the truth, and that the truest, best, most authentically human way to live this one, singular life of yours is by following him.”ⁱⁱ

“Who do you say that I am” is not a demand for definition. It is an invitation to discipleship. Because when we confess who Jesus is, we commit to a life that bears witness to this faith.

To confess Jesus as Messiah is not only to accept him. It is to commit our lives to him. Our faith is only consequential, in the deepest sense, if we lift up our cross and *follow*. Jesus turned to his disciples and asked, “Who do you say that I am?” Speak

for yourselves. What difference do I make in your lives? Perhaps the time has come for us to speak for ourselves, in bold words and powerful action, revealing the faith that has remade our lives and our world.

This holiday weekend our nation remembers the life and witness of a powerful leader who was first a faithful follower. Martin Luther King, Jr. led a movement shaped by the teachings and life of Jesus Christ that he first learned as a child of the church. His was a faith-fueled witness to the power of the gospel. King rooted his work in the testimony of the early Church, those first disciples who found the courage to imagine a different kind of kingdom. In an early sermon, shortly after his installation as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, King spoke these words, “We need to recapture the Gospel glow of the early Christians, who were nonconformists in the truest sense of the word and refused to shape their witness according to the mundane patterns of the world. Willingly they sacrificed fame, fortune, and life itself on behalf of the cause they knew to be right.”ⁱⁱⁱ Their witness can be our work.

The earliest Christian affirmation, before the council of Nicea or the formation of the Apostle’s Creed, contained three simple words that meant everything to our ancestors in faith. ***Jesus is Lord***. It was a risky confession because of what it ruled out. No one else is Lord, not the emperor or the chief priests or the gods of Rome or the idols of our own creation. Jesus is Lord. It’s the most transformative and costly statement we Christians make because Jesus does not need fans or admirers or supporters. He has no use for those who twist the clear witness of his life to suit pre-determined perspectives or prejudice. Jesus demands costly discipleship.

Here’s the thing about following Jesus. There will come a moment, maybe many moments, when we must decide whether or not to pick up our cross.

There will come a moment, maybe many moments, when the demand of discipleship requires a sacrifice, a risk, a cost. There will come a moment, maybe many moments, when circumstances make it clear that we cannot serve two masters, cannot claim two lords. In such moments, the faithful path is not the easiest one. Following Jesus means releasing self-righteousness, putting aside our pride, abandoning the anger to which we cling, and accepting a different perspective on the life abundant. For Martin Luther King, Jr. there came a moment of decision. His choice? “I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.” The path of genuine, Christlike love, will always challenge us. When our faith makes us comfortable, it’s a good time to examine our hearts again.

So, let us pray for courage to move beyond right answers and embrace righteous living. Let us pray for the wisdom to choose the way of Christ even when it demands the transformation of our lives. Let us pray for the faith to walk together to the foot of the cross and learn the truth of sacrificial love.

This week, the words of a song I learned at summer camp kept running through my mind and heart. I pray that they are true for me. I recommit myself to them this morning. I ask that you consider doing the same.

I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back. Amen.

ⁱ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Touchstone Press, 1995. p. 45.

ⁱⁱ John M. Buchanan, “The Way of the Heart,” preached at Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago, September 24, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/Vol06Scans/Nov1954TransformedNonconformist.pdf