

February 28, 2021 The Second Sunday in Lent

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Mark 8:27-38

"Who do you say he is?"

Douglas T. King

It is has often said that the best way to have a conversation with a teenager is in the car. The addendum to that these days would be a teenager in the car without their phone. First of all you have a trapped audience. But more importantly everyone is looking out the window. With your eyes focused on what is approaching rather than looking at each other people are more likely to let their guard down and reveal themselves. It is a good time to try and ask the big questions.

Well Jesus and the disciples are not exactly in a car but they are on the way, on the way to the villages in Caesarea Philippi, and on the way to the cross, yet not all of them know that just yet. The gospel of Mark is a sprint to the cross, a brief sixteen chapter race to the crucifixion. In Mark there is not much dawdling. While they are on the way Jesus uses the opportunity to ask some big questions. The first one is "Who do people say that I am?"

The responses are numerous. "John the Baptist." "Elijah." "One of the prophets." It is interesting that he does not contradict a single one of these identities. What Jesus does do, of course, is ask a question that is a lot closer to home with much more at stake. "Who do you say that I am?" My guess is that eye contact or not, most of the disciples were afraid to say a thing. It was too big a question to get wrong.

But we can always count on Peter to rush right in where others fear to tread. He blurts out an answer, "You are the Messiah." Bingo, Peter gets the answer right. A rare moment in the gospel of Mark. But he receives no gold star from Jesus. Instead, Jesus orders them all to silence. Jesus goes on to teach them what the road ahead will look like for him. He names himself as a Messiah with the title Son of Man.

In the book of Daniel the Son of Man is one who ascends to the divine throne which makes sense for the definition of a Messiah. But Daniel also identifies the Son of Man with those Israelites who suffer because of their righteousness. Jesus tells them of the necessity of his suffering and rejection and death, and then resurrection.

The ever passionate Peter is quick to respond. He pulls Jesus aside, and challenges the idea that as the messiah, he could or would suffer. Jesus' response is passionate as well. "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

Jesus offers no rebuke to the variety of identities the disciples share with him as "John the Baptist," or "Elijah," or "one of the prophets." Regardless of how far afield those answers may be he attacks none of them. The single part of his identity he will not have denied is that he will suffer and die. Jesus will not have that contradicted for a single moment in time. It is so important that he refers to his disciple, Peter, as Satan, the adversary, for daring to challenge the idea.

The gospel of Mark is filled with a variety of opinions about Jesus' identity. His family believes he is out of his mind, so much so that they try to restrain him. The Pharisees view Jesus as a Jew who is careless in the observation of Jewish

law. The scribes believe he is one possessed by an evil spirit. Herod is among those who believe he is John the Baptist raised from the dead. And others see him as solely a prophet, or a healer, or a rabbi.

None of these efforts to define who Jesus is raise up the visceral and ferocious response we get from him when Peter contradicts Jesus' definition of himself as the Messiah, the Son of Man, who must suffer and die. So, who do you say Jesus is? Now, I am not asking how you would answer this question if you were sitting in an adult education class taking some quiz. Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is the messiah. Jesus is the second person of the trinity.

I am wondering who Jesus is in terms of how he is present and alive in your life. What does Jesus mean to you on a day to day basis? I imagine that some of us find Jesus most present in our lives as a teacher. The sermons and parables, and teachings, as they are recorded in the gospels, provide us with guidance about how to live our lives. Others of us might relate to Jesus primarily as a healer. At some point we have felt that Jesus has mended some broken part of ourselves. Still others may experience Jesus as an example. We look at Jesus' life and seek to emulate what he does as best we can. Others may experience Jesus most directly as a source of forgiveness, as the one whose love allows us to return to God and move beyond our mistakes.

Who do you say Jesus is? Take a moment. What is the real answer in your heart? As I think back on the possible answers I just suggested I am struck that I did not list my own. My answer is the one who struggles and suffers beside me. Now that is not to say that I do not sympathize with Peter's rebuttal of

Jesus. We all want a champion by our side. We all want to experience God in God's all-powerful glory swooping in to save us. But we also have learned in our lives that as faithful as we may be; as hard as we might be work; as successful and lucky as we may be; there will be times when we struggle. There will be times when we feel particularly vulnerable. I call these hospital bed moments.

At my previous congregation I was responsible for our student minister program. Every year we would have three or four student ministers serve beside us and I had the great pleasure and privilege of supervising them. This means that as they graduate from seminary and go out into church, I have ended up serving as a reference for many of them. Obviously each student had their own unique combination of talents and areas in which they needed to grow. But for me personally, there was only one criteria that I prized above all else and was anxious to share with churches seeking pastors.

Would I want this person to come and visit me when I was in the hospital? If I was laying in bed with tubes running in and out of me, feeling helpless and concerned, would I want this person to come walking through the door and sit down beside me. I have known brilliant preachers, esteemed theologians, charismatic leaders, clergy with all types of talents and abilities who I would not necessarily want to join me in that hospital room. But some people have been blessed with the gift of empathy. They understand what it is to struggle and suffer. They have lived it. I trust that they would not be a neutral spectator to what I was going through. They would have some understanding of my pain. In some way they would share it with me.

There are so very many ways for us to experience Jesus Christ. And I suppose that is not at all surprising. How could any single understanding fully encapsulate who the Son of God is? However well we believe we are capable of defining who Jesus is, I am confident that the full answer is deeper and wider than our imaginations will let us travel. What today's scripture text reminds us is that there is no definition of Jesus, that is accurate, that does not include the reality that he is the one who suffered and died for us.

This truth lets us know that Jesus suffers and struggles beside us. The Son of God is not a distant observer of our pain. He knows exactly what it feels like. And he is beside us, sharing in it with us. As grateful as I am for Jesus as the teacher, and the example, and all of the other ways we have of thinking of him, this is the one aspect of who he is that I just could not live without.

I understand why he snapped at Peter in that moment. He was preparing Peter and the disciples for all of the challenges before them. And unless they understood that he suffered beside them they would not be able to carry on. I certainly know I would not be able to do so. I am grateful every day for Jesus, the struggle he chose to endure, and the companionship he offers to us when we are struggling.

Thanks be to God. Amen.