

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday, September 12, 2021 Proper 19B
Text: Mark 8: 27-38
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Theme: Summoned to Follow

If you are going to follow Jesus, inevitably the question of identity must arise. Who do you say that I am? Jesus is a Spirit Person and a Wisdom figure who heals, teaches, proclaims the coming kingdom of God, calls religious elites back to the center, and runs demons out of God's property, the human soul. If we were around anyone doing these things, we too would be asking, **Who is this?** The disciples had already been talking about it and so Jesus in a playful but serious move, turns the tables on them and asks them to answer the question themselves.

As one commentator said, "Everybody is right but not right enough." (Shea) I love that explanation. Everybody gets some of who Jesus is but no one really has it right. He's certainly in the prophetic tradition of calling people back to God and highlighting injustice but he is also a lover of souls and mystic who seems to know God so intimately that you want to learn from him.

Peter takes the conversation deeper with his bold proclamation. "You are the Messiah!" I love people who make you think, who ask the difficult question, who dare to put it out there so that we all grow. Who is like that in our life, impetuous, passionate, all-in Peter? Peter is right, or at least he has the right word, he's fishing in the right water.

Messiah is a big word, freighted with meaning for the Jews. Peter blurts it out, but his understanding must be conditioned, shaped, refined a bit.

Immediately, after Peter says, "You are the Christ!" Jesus begins to deconstruct his answer, shaping it in cruciform pattern. "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. He said this quite openly " *Mark 8:30*.

Messiah has a core meaning "Son of Man," or "Daughter of Man." It means one who lives in solidarity with God and others. The Messiah is meant to be the first fruits of a new humanity. Jesus exemplifies this new humanity and **all who follow him** are part of this new way of being we are all meant to be a "Sons and Daughters of Man." The new humanity is a challenging one and is not easily accepted by the religious folks, it doesn't match up to their values and so it must be made to suffer and be

eliminated. Jesus, “The Son of Man,” is pushed out of this world (i.e., Pushed onto a cross) because in his very person he opened up a new way to be Sons and Daughters of Humanity and that was too threatening for those with power. But while they did succeed in killing the “Son of Man,” it was not enough because the power of God, or as Mark puts it, three days, brought that new humanity back into life and into play in the world anew.

Jesus’ confrontation with Peter points out something important. The concept of “Messiah,” has many meanings. Most of them have to do with glory and conquering or triumph over the oppressors. It usually means honor and status for the Messiah and their followers. So, Jesus’ description of the Messiah runs up against Peter’s notion of the Messiah he is longing for and has been waiting for all his life. No one’s conception of the Messiah included the things Jesus had just included: rejection, suffering, death, and resurrection. Jesus describes a new messianic way. He tells Peter that this is how the Messiah will be known and this is how things will unfold. It is the straight truth, no sugar coating and without spin. He said it openly and without apology.

Jesus praises Peter for getting the belief right; then, he immediately says that Peter and the others with him must deny themselves, take up “their cross, and follow me.”

It’s not enough to get the right answer on the quiz, even when the key question is about Jesus. We must also follow.

I hope that’s good news for many of you. I expect that there are many of you here today who are just like Simon Peter in that you know something about Jesus—after all, you know enough to be here in church or online listening for a word from him. And yet, often you find out, in listening to scripture or maybe in the sermon, that you don’t know everything you’d like to know about Jesus. But maybe knowing isn’t the main thing. Maybe the main thing is the following Jesus.

Peter came up with the stunning right answer. He got an “A.” The only one in the class to know, “You are the Messiah!” And yet Peter, like us, did not fully understand the significance of the peculiar way of Jesus as the suffering messiah.

And yet Jesus invited those who did not fully understand him to follow him. And follow they did. And so have you. An often-heard charge against Christians is that Christians fail to “practice what they preach.” It’s a fair criticism, as long as the critic understands that Christians are always amateurs, always on our way, tagging along behind the God who, though always going on ahead of us leading us (Mark 10:32),

refuses to leave us be. Our following Jesus doesn't mean that we've mastered Jesus, that we finally know everything about him we'd like to know.

Every time we gather here in our church, we are God's people on the way. We've seen enough of Jesus for us to cast our lot with him, yet we do not fully understand him, do not know why God's love for us involved such suffering, death, and betrayal of God's Son. But maybe fully knowing is not the point. The point is for us to follow Jesus, to lay our questions aside for the moment and walk with him, watch him, learn from him. It's easy to point to the gap between what Christians profess ("Jesus Christ is Lord") and how we presently live ("The United States is synonymous with God's kingdom"). There's always a gap, a contested space, between our designation as "the body of Christ" and the empirical reality of the poor old church.

Do not accuse us of hypocrisy when we believe more than we are able to live. Our discipleship is aspirational, provisional, constantly under threat, always on the way. We hold our doubts and our questions in the faith, that by the grace of God, one day we shall be more than we could have been without the repeated summons, "follow me!" In any age, the church never outgrows its first name, "the Way" (Acts 9:2).

Mark's Gospel reminds us that from the earliest days the very first disciples of Jesus were confused by Jesus. And yet, they knew enough about him to know that they would only grow in their understanding of Jesus by stepping up, accepting responsibility, and becoming his disciples. They knew that Jesus never said, "Agree with me." He said, "Follow me." They didn't know everything, but they knew that the gospel requires more than admiration or lip service.

Because Jesus preached, "You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world... Let your light shine before people, so they can see the good things you do and praise your Father who is in heaven" (Matt 5:13-16), it's not enough to believe things about Jesus, even believing the right things. We must follow Jesus. And it's in the following that we become deeper in our believing.

This Gospel lesson concerns the shape of discipleship, of following Jesus. Jesus wants to make it clear that his path is different than the path we are all shown and disciplined/initiated into by the world around us. Following Jesus is not about the constant drive to enhance our life and enrich ourselves on the world's terms, which Jesus describes as an "adulterous and sinful generation." Jesus is not interested in our upward mobility, our striving after status or position in the world. His teaching

is that if that is what you are seeking then you will lose track of what is truly important. It reminds me of the famous line from *The Little Prince*, “What is essential is invisible to the eye.”

The larger life that Jesus wants for us is lost to our sight when we place our attention on human things. We are made in such a way that when we focus on enlarging ourselves, we are unable to see the vastness of the kingdom of God around us. In trying to become larger we actually diminish ourselves.

In a commencement speech to the graduates of Dartmouth College in 2002, Mr. Fred Rogers of Mr. Rogers Neighborhood, told this story:

He had the privilege of attending a Special Olympics race and at that race he was watching one of the sprinting races. The nine athletes lined up and the gun went off and everyone began to run toward the finish line. Everything was going well but then a little way into the race one of the boys fell down and began to cry. The other eight racers, all of them, heard him crying and slowed down and then stopped and turned around to look. All of eight of them went back to where the boy was crying on the ground. One of the racers a girl with Down’s Syndrome bent down and kissed the boy’s knee that was hurt and said, “That will make if feel better.” Eventually they helped him up and then, arm in arm, all nine of the athletes walked toward the finish line together. They all finished the race together at the same time. When they crossed the line the crowd erupted into joyous applause, and there were tears on the faces of many. Something extraordinarily beautiful had taken place in that stadium.

Fred Rogers said this, “Deep down, we know that what matters in life is more than winning for ourselves. What really matters is helping others win too, even if it means slowing down and changing our course now and then.”

I think it was an example of what it means to have our attention on the larger life of God instead of our own success or enlargement. Following Jesus is not meant to be a glamorous endeavor. In fact, it will most likely get us ridiculed a bit, made fun of as idealists, shouted down as soft and too optimistic, dismissed as dreamers. However, what is essential is often invisible to the eye. **What is truly valuable is to live as much as possible in the larger realm of God’s love.** When we center ourselves in that love then we will find ourselves following the impulses of that love. It will lead us to becoming servants and toward seeking the well-being of others. Instead of being great we become small. Instead of needing to tell everyone what to do, we grow in service.

This is not the easy or most popular way to be in the world. The powers that be will be made uncomfortable. In all likelihood they will not simply dismiss or ignore it they will try to discourage it, stamp it out and make those who follow this way suffer. That is why it is the way of the cross. This is what it means to allow ourselves to become a cruciform people. We know Jesus walked in this way and we trust that it is the way that leads to life. So, we commit ourselves to this unusual way of the cross, knowing that it leads to a larger life, the life of God's vast love. We love and continue to love and try to love again even when we fail because we know that the only way to change a loveless world is not through power or criticism or violence but by love.

The significance of this rich passage is in the paradoxes it holds. I learn who I am by discovering who Jesus is. The way to self-fulfillment is the way of self-denial. It is in giving my life away that I receive a life worth living.

One of the dangers of the Christian life is to begin to believe that it is unattainable or meant only for a few supreme spiritual athletes but that is not the case. The Christian life is not meant only for giants or martyrs it is meant for ordinary people like you and me. It is for the grandmother who devotes her life to raising children in need of a home when she believed she was done with childrearing. It is for the man whose faithful devotion to a mentally ill wife is quiet and steady. It is for the youth whose civil disobedience for conscience's sake leads to arrest and prison. It is for the tireless lawyer who fights to protect the safety and wellbeing of a community being despoiled by corporate greed. The life of Christ has been for countless thousands who through the centuries and many contexts have interpreted this text with their lives.

I think that the words of the hymn which we just sang a few minutes ago are a fitting conclusion to this sermon, as they communicate the something important about the spiritual life of following. God's word is always an address whereby we are summoned, enlisted, called by God to be God's person in the world.

Lord your summons echoes true
When I but call your name.
Let me turn and follow you
And never be the same.
In your company I'll go
Where your love and footsteps show

Thus, I'll move and live and grow in and you in me.

I am indebted to John Shea's commentary on this passage as well as to Mr. Fred Rogers commencement address to Dartmouth College in 2002.