

You Are... – Mark 8:27-38

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How many of you, when waiting in line at the grocery checkout, have never looked at that rack of tabloid publications sitting there and been curious enough to want to open them and get the inside scoop into some celebrity's personal life?

Our curiosity is peaked whenever we see headlines about so-and-so divorcing so-and-so or so-and-so having a mental breakdown. We want to know more. We want to know the gossip.

When kids are young and they witness adults talking about some sort of crisis at work or issue involving others, they, too, want to know what is going on. Explaining to them that they do not need to know or are not yet ready to learn about these matters simply intensifies their desire. They wonder how someone can be trustworthy if he or she will not tell them everything—immediately.

In the so-called information age, the idea that we might not yet be ready—emotionally, intellectually, practically—to know some things tests our patience. I suppose this is why conspiracy theories thrive in the absence of knowledge. It is always easier to suppose that there is a concerted plot to hide things from us than to acknowledge our own inabilities to understand. (The COVID-19 pandemic has been rife with conspiracy theories, it seems.)

Paying attention to this reading from Mark's gospel may help explain why Jesus was a focal point for conspiracy theories. Even at the high point of his ministry in Galilee, people were not quite sure what to make of Jesus. Some thought he was John the Baptist; others said he was Elijah or one of the other prophets. When Jesus asked his closest followers who they thought he was, Peter responded, 'You are the Messiah.'

Mark doesn't tell us where this remark came from. Perhaps Peter was inspired; perhaps he simply took up language he had

heard others use. Regardless, he said it, and Jesus responded that he didn't want Peter or the others to say it again until further notice.

Jesus, the embodiment of truth, wanted his disciples to withhold information. On the face of it, this does not seem right. Spreading the word that Jesus is the Messiah seems like a worthy and even necessary enterprise. Jesus' call to silence concerning his identity reminds us that knowing the right form of words to use about Jesus might not be sufficient. Clearly, Peter knew the right words, but by the end of the passage, it is also clear that his use of the term *Messiah* and Jesus' identity as the Messiah did not match up.

For Peter, the term *Messiah* was incompatible with Jesus' obedience to God and the suffering and death that would come from his obedience. For Peter, *Messiah* and *cross* just did not belong together. Further, it becomes clear that Peter was not alone in his views. As the Gospel unfolds, virtually all of Jesus' closest followers abandon, betray or deny him as he moves ever closer to the cross.

This recognition lies at the root of Jesus' unwillingness to have his followers going around Galilee saying that he is the Messiah but not understanding the nature of his messiahship. As Jesus made clear, such understanding is not simply a matter of mastering the correct vocabulary to use about Jesus. Rather, we learn how to speak properly of Jesus as the Christ only in the course of taking up our cross and following him.

If you're like me, you're wary of people who seem to know all the answers. When it comes to religion—any religion—we're a bit troubled by those who claim to have all the insight as to how God works and who God entirely is. Because just when he hear them say they know it all, up comes something that doesn't compute with what they've told us.

That's not to say that there are not definitive attributes we can ascribe to Jesus. Because there certainly are. But we've only come to know those qualities of Jesus as we have grown in our own faith. And we will only come to know more about Jesus as we continue to grow in our faith.

Witnessing is not about only sharing words about God; it is living lives of discipleship that will help us to know God more fully and to convey that knowledge more accurately.

Discipleship helps us form the right words to be used when telling others who Jesus is.

What is discipleship? Well, here's what discipleship is not.

Old Joe was driving down the street in a sweat because he had an important meeting and couldn't find a parking place.

Looking up toward heaven, he said "Lord, take pity on me. If you find me a parking place I will go to church every Sunday for the rest of my life and give up tequila."

Miraculously, a parking place appeared.

Old Joe looked up again and said, "Never mind. I found one."

That is not discipleship.

On the other hand, discipleship is what Dietrich Bonehoeffer characterizes it as: "Every moment and every situation challenges us to action and to obedience," writes Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship*. "We have literally no time to sit down and ask ourselves whether so-and-so is our neighbor or not. We must get into action and obey — we must behave like a neighbor to him. But perhaps this shocks you. Perhaps you still think you ought to think out beforehand and know what you ought to do. To that, there is only one answer. You can only know and think about it by actually doing it. It is no use asking questions; for it is only through obedience that you come to learn the truth."

Through our obedience that comes in discipleship, we learn the truth—about who Jesus is and about who we are in relationship to Jesus. When we learn the truth through the actions we take and the growth we make, we then become more qualified to call Jesus the Messiah.

In this passage from Mark, Peter seems to bounce from one verbal extreme to the other—at one point saying more about Jesus than he really understands, later denying that he even knows him. In spite of his verbal gaffes, however, Peter does not cease to follow. As

theologian Stephen Fowl writes, “His persistence demonstrates that following Jesus to the cross and beyond has the power to transform us and thereby our speech through the work of the Spirit. It would appear that following begets wisdom, and that wisdom will manifest itself in speech and silence appropriate to the various occasions in which we find ourselves.”

Who do you say Jesus is? If you had to ascribe a title or two or three to him, which words would you choose?

It probably depends on the day, the moment, the season of our discipleship lives.

When I was a kid, I would probably have described Jesus most predominantly as a teacher—the one who taught me about loving neighbor, giving to the stranger, and speaking truthfully. When I was a teenager and was thinking about what I believed, I was asked to consider Jesus primarily as Lord and Savior. And into adulthood, I then thought of Jesus in other ways. He is the bringer of justice, he is a good shepherd—guiding us and rescuing us. And in this season in which I find myself now, I view Jesus as light amid great darkness. Not one who causes darkness but one who leads us out of darkness or sits with us in our own darkness until he leads us to the light.

Who do you say Jesus is?

The blessed thing about Jesus is that he is all this to us—in some seasons more one identity than in others. Yet, at all times, he is constant. And while we don’t fully have the capability of comprehending just all that he is to us and to the world, we grow in that understanding through our discipleship.

Thank God for Peter, for his discipleship that would allow him one day to know truly what his confession of Jesus as Messiah really means. May we all follow in his footsteps, so that we can one day match our actions with the words we’re probably at times not overly-qualified to speak.

Jesus: Messiah, Friend, Shepherd, Rescuer, Judge, Light.
Thanks be to God. Amen.