

### **Mark 8:27-38**

<sup>27</sup>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?” <sup>28</sup>And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” <sup>29</sup>He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” <sup>30</sup>And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

<sup>31</sup>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. <sup>32</sup>He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup>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.”

<sup>34</sup>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. <sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup>Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup>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.”

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### Who Do You Say That I Am?

Who is Jesus?

Has there ever been a question that has been pondered more times, or more passionately, than this one?

I know when I ask myself who is Jesus, I can feel like I’m on the spot, even when there’s no one to hear the answer but me. It can feel like a test of faith... a question used to determine whether or not a person believes the right thing.

At different times and places in history, people’s lives have depended on how they answered this question. Even today, in many communities, and even here in our own valley, what a person *believes* about Jesus can be considered proof positive of whether a person will be “saved” after death or sent to Hell.

And yet, this is certainly not how Jesus intended the question. Throughout the gospel stories, Jesus cares about how people *act*. He cares about what they believe only as it has an impact on their *actions*. He says again and again that how we *act* is a truer expression of our faith than anything we might say about what we believe.

He says the widow who gives a penny has more faith than the rich man who gives much more money than her but less of himself.

And so, in exploring the question, “Who do you say that I am,” we will do better to focus less on our beliefs *about* Jesus and focus more on how our understanding of him can help us to live better lives.

And because this is such a huge subject and we want to get home for lunch before, let’s say, next week... let’s limit the scope of our inquiry.

Let’s limit it first by approaching only what theologian Marcus Borg calls the pre-Easter Jesus, the historical figure of Jesus – the flesh-and-blood man who was born, walked the earth, and after a ministry that lasted about three years, was executed by the Romans. We’ll leave aside for now the questions that are raised about the post-Easter Jesus, the one who appears after his resurrection, the one who enters our experience as the *risen Christ*.

To further simplify our inquiry into the pre-Easter Jesus, we will focus on just two concepts of Jesus’ story that best summarize who he is, the two aspects of *how he lived* that most *crystallize* his teaching. These two parts are his relationship with God and his radical compassion for others.

First let’s look at Jesus’ relationship with God. The gospel writers tell us that Jesus *experiences* the divine in his daily life, and it is through this experience of the divine that he draws his power. Those who heard Jesus said he spoke with “authority,” and this authority is best understood as flowing from his own spiritual experience.<sup>1</sup>

It is Jesus’ dependence on his relationship with Spirit that was the *source* of his wisdom and his healing and all the rest. More than anything else, Jesus’ impact in his ministry and, indeed, throughout history, comes back to his ability to maintain what we might call “conscious contact” with the mysterious source of all life which we call God.

Jesus does *not* rely on his Jewish tradition as a source of what to believe. He relies on his own day-to-day experience of Spirit. He uses Jewish tradition only to provide *examples, cross-references* from the stories about other people who came before him and who also looked to spirit for guidance in their lives and their communities, people like Elijah and John the Baptist and Moses.

Throughout the gospels, we see Jesus return to a place of solitude in order to reconnect with spirit. He uses spiritual practices, including fasting and prayer. It is likely that he meditated as we are taught today by our sister traditions from the East.

Moreover, and this is part of the radical good news in this aspect of Jesus’ story, he says that we too can have this relationship with God. Just

as Jesus does, he tells us over and over again, we can go to the well of Spirit and find what we need. Indeed, he *implores* us to seek experiential knowledge of God. Here, he said, is where our treasure is.<sup>ii</sup>

Jesus helps us to form a personal relationship with God by teaching us to *pray* to God by calling Him *our father*. He wants us to *experience* that we are, in spirit, “of one substance” with God, just as our physical bodies are made of the same substance as our earthly parents. He wants us to know the treasure of our spiritual essence, where, as he stays, “neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal.”<sup>iii</sup>

Jesus also wants us to know God as our father and mother because he wants us to experience God’s love as strongly as he does.<sup>iv</sup>

Again and again, Jesus urges us to realize we are loved. He tells us that no matter how far down the scale we have gone, we are forgiven. We need only be willing to recognize it. How? By seeking conscious contact with God. It is what the systems folks call a “positive feedback loop,” in which momentum at any point produces momentum at the next point, and so on.

It is this Jesus’ experience of God’s unconditional love and forgiveness that drives the second aspect of our focus this morning in exploring “who do you say that I am?” This is Jesus’ radical compassion for others.

His teaching on this is completely counter to the dominant culture of his community, the culture of the priests and Pharisees, which said that the key to salvation is holiness, and that holiness depends on purity of belief and purity of behavior. Jesus turns this worldview completely on its head by eating with women and others considered unclean and by breaking the purity laws in favor of helping others. He admonishes us to “love one another as I have loved you.”<sup>v</sup>

He says the priest and the Levite have less faith than the unclean Samaritan who helps the dying beggar. He says the brother of the prodigal son excludes himself from the joy of heaven by holding his brother’s sins against him.

Again and again, Jesus urges us to seek the kingdom of heaven by considering the welfare of our brothers and sisters. It is a teaching that can inspire us in healing the brokenness in our world today, whether in our families, our communities, or the wider world.

Perhaps this is the most important reality about *experiencing* our faith rather than seeing it as an assemblage of *beliefs*. When we allow our brains to reduce our faith to *beliefs*, we can easily constrain ourselves to an either-or existence, as in, “if I open myself up to a new possibility over there, I will lose something I need over here.” But even though our brains work like this, life *doesn’t*. We need not be afraid of losing by giving. FEAR is an acronym for “false expectations appearing real.” Our brains turn reality on its head.

When we trust the process and allow ourselves to listen to the still, small voice inside of us, we find the truth that a third way *always appears*

which we hadn't been able to see before. Once we have the willingness to walk through that door, we open ourselves to new possibilities, which lead us down paths we hadn't anticipated. These discoveries, and the joy that comes from realizing them, are the source of blessings of giving rather than always surpass receiving.

This is what Jesus means when he tells the crowd in today's passage, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves..." He is expressing the paradox of our human/spiritual existence. It is by giving that we receive. It is by denying our small selves – what some call our egos – that we discover our true selves in God.

When we face the choice to give or hold back, we can't know how things will turn out. It takes a leap of faith, grounded in our conscious contact with God. And as we practice, each leap builds our faith – our *experience* -- that turning to the divine within us will yield results that are beyond what we can imagine.

And so we return full circle to where we started: our ability to be compassionate with others depends on our internal *experience* of God. Together, these are the alpha and omega of Jesus' teaching. They are the two mutually-supporting commandments he says are the greatest of all the laws: love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

I have heard it said that these can be seen as the two parts of the cross: the vertical, representing contact between us and God, and the horizontal, representing our relationship with each other and all creation.

It is notable that Jesus mentions the cross for the first time in the passage from Mark we heard today. This passage marks the point in the story when everything changes. Until now, Jesus and his disciples have been traveling through Galilee on a teaching and healing mission. Now, Jesus tells them, they are headed to Jerusalem and the cross.

Peter is so upset by this prediction of Jesus' suffering and death that he tries to shush him, but Jesus rebukes him, saying, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." This is stern language, but it is really a loving admonition. Jesus wants Peter to go to the divine well, where he will find the strength he needs for what is coming. We know from the rest of the story that Peter does learn this lesson, though he also messes up a lot, just as we do.

As Jesus sets his and his disciples' direction toward Jerusalem, he tells the crowds, we are reminded that life is hard. Crosses come in many shapes and sizes. There is no turning back. And yet, if we are willing to open ourselves to the light, the darkness will inevitably lift.

Who would have predicted that Jesus' death on his cross could have become the greatest symbol the world has ever known for the supremacy of light over darkness?

There is untold help available in pursuing this question of who Jesus is. We need only treat the question as a puzzle rather than a test of

belief, and try to stay open to what comes as we are led to deepen our relationship with the divine mystery that is at the heart of all life.

And as we reach to grow in the knowledge and love of God, we will discover what we need. We will find love, forgiveness, acceptance, wisdom, strength, and even sometimes joy. And then, often when we least expect it, we will find new depths of compassion for our neighbor, and we will know again the blessing that is the truest answer to who Jesus is.

May it be so for each and every one of us.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Borg, Marcus, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. San Francisco: Harper Collins 1995

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 13.44, *NRSV*.

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 6.20, *NRSV*.

<sup>iv</sup> John 15.10, *NRSV*.

<sup>v</sup> John 15:12, *NRSV*.