

“Who do you say that I am?” A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
September 16, 2018, Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
Mark 8:27-38

Let us pray together: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

Jesus’ question: “Who do you say that I am?” What is your answer?

Jesus first asks the disciples who others say that he is. That’s an easier question to answer, isn’t it? Each of you could describe what others say about Jesus. I’d venture to say that each of you could verbalize what you have heard or know that describes Jesus. Let’s mention a few now.

After Jesus asks the disciples about what others say about him he turns to the disciples and asks the hard question that I opened with: “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus gets personal. Peter answers that Jesus is the Messiah. Peter is most likely taking about the Messiah, the conquering warrior that will cast off Roman rule and restore Israel to its former glory.

But then Jesus throws Peter and the other disciples for a loop. He surprises them with information they did not expect at all. Jesus tells them he will undergo great suffering and be killed – and after three days be raised from the dead. To say the least, this was a shock to the disciples who were expecting Jesus to restore Israel to its prior greatness through military might. Maybe when that happened, Jesus would give them a powerful position in the new government. Suffering, death – this was not what they had in mind!

The disciples must have appointed Peter to tell Jesus he had this all wrong. In their minds Jesus was to conquer, not die! And we know that Jesus scolded Peter for his comment by saying: **“Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”**

Now the disciples are confused. Their leader is going to die. Everything was going so well. Jesus was healing folks and gaining a large following. Jesus had just fed 4,000 people from a few loaves and fishes. Boy, was that impressive! What’s this talk about dying and resurrection? The disciples probably entirely missed the resurrection part of Jesus’ comment and focused on the dying part – the part that would end their hopes of overthrowing the Romans.

What Jesus says next probably further confused the disciples and the crowd even more. Jesus tells those listening if they want to follow him, then they must take up their cross and follow him. Now those hearing Jesus’ words knew what he meant. They were all too familiar with the way the Romans made the person who was about to be crucified carry the cross he was going to be nailed to, just as Jesus was destined to do.

Jesus also says that if you want to follow him, Jesus, you must deny yourself, not aspire to positions of power. If a person accepts and understands these words of Jesus, each person would have to make a major shift in his or her way of thinking.

I'm sure that some of the people stopped following Jesus after they heard these words. I'm sure that through the years these words have caused many people to rethink their relationship with Jesus.

Take up your cross? It's much more comfortable to sing a few hymns and put a couple of dollars in the collection plate and then head out to Sunday lunch. Who signs up to hear that you're no longer to live for yourself and that our lives are to reflect love and loyalty to Jesus. No wonder Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. It seems we want anything but a savior who gets killed.

Let's step back and consider what it means to follow Jesus, to take up our cross, to lose our life for Jesus' sake.

Right off, let me say that Jesus is not telling us to seek out suffering or martyrdom. We know that Jesus didn't seek suffering. It was the outcome of his mission that was countercultural. Neither is Jesus talking about the suffering we see in the world: hunger, pain, war, illness, disease.

Jesus is talking about suffering the consequences of following Jesus faithfully. As Jesus says: **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.** This means we are putting Jesus' priorities and purposes and applying his teachings – all ahead of our priorities. It means using our time, money, spiritual gifts and energy so that others can experience God's love expressed in Jesus Christ.

How can we possibly do this? It's not human instinct to be generous and forgiving. We are trained to be self-sufficient, to be self-reliant, to be self-centered! We're really no different from the disciples who were interested in positions of power. The only way we can make this change in our lives is to rely on God's life-giving power, the power that raised Jesus to life when others thought he was dead.

Let me repeat. How can we possibly do this? Rely on God's life-giving power. Do we accomplish this and then check off the box that says I've given my life to Jesus? No, taking up my cross and losing my life for Christ's sake involves a journey. It's not an instantaneous accomplishment. We don't finally arrive. I say something to that effect each Sunday. Whoever you are, wherever you are on your journey of faith, you're welcome here!

Being a follower of Jesus means working to understand our faith. That's a process that takes a lifetime. Being a follower of Jesus means telling Jesus your issues with your faith – your doubts and questions. Being a follower of Jesus means being open to understanding God's leading in your life. Being a follower of Jesus takes faith, believing

in and acting on something beyond yourself. Living for Jesus may take you out of your comfort zone.

This quote from Guy Sayles seems appropriate: "Faith will either affect ordinary awareness, create new ways of living and energize every dimension of life, or it will be formulaic, superficial and empty." (Guy Sayles, internet posting, February 14, 2012.)

Georgene Johnson ... lived in Cleveland, Ohio. She was 42 years old. She was trying to have a good attitude about being 42 years old, so she started running and exercising to keep in shape. She said, "I'm not going to look like I am 42, or at least I am going to look like a good 42."

She did well in her running. She was running farther every day. She thought she would try a little competition and entered a 10K race. That's about six miles. Nervous about her first race, she got up early, arrived at the start of the race. To her surprise there were a lot of people milling around, stretching, getting ready. All of a sudden, a voice on the microphone said, "Move to the starting line." This is it. A gun sounded, and they were off, like a huge wave, hundreds of runners, sweeping her up. She was in the race.

After about four miles it occurred to her that they ought to be turning around and heading back to the finish line. She wondered why they didn't turn around. She stopped and asked an official, "How come the course isn't turning around?" He said, "Ma'am, you are running the Cleveland Marathon." Twenty-six miles. Her event, the 10K, was to start a half-hour after the start of the marathon.

Some of us would have stopped right there and said, that's it, I'm going home. But to her credit, she kept right on going, finished the race. She said this: "This is not the race I trained for. This is not the race I entered. But for better or worse, this is the race that I am in"

It is just like the disciples at Caesarea Philippi. They thought they could spend their whole lives in Galilee, where the following of Jesus is easy. Now Jesus says, "If you are my disciple, then you will take up your cross and follow me to Jerusalem." (Mark Trotter, "This is not the race I entered," Sermon of September 14, 1997, First United Methodist Church of San Diego, fumcsd.org/sermons/sr091497.html.)

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. Are you ready to cast off your expectations, give your all to Jesus and run the race Jesus is calling you to?

"Who do you say that I am?"