

WHO WE SAY HE IS

Mark 8: 27-38

Steve Lindsley

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They were making their way to a town down the road called Caesarea Philippi. This wasn't some "event," like the Sermon on the Mount or the Feeding of the 5000. It was just Jesus and his friends, talking along the way, tucked ever so neatly in the middle of Mark's gospel.

And the thing is, I don't know if what I'm getting ready to describe to you is how it actually happened. Because the story, just a few verses long, leaves a lot to the imagination. And so I imagine them walking on that dusty road, probably in three or four little groups, talking about simple things like family and weather and politics. Bartholomew's son won his class spelling bee, *how about the hot streak we've been having around here these days*, stuff like that. Eventually the conversation, as it always seems to, drifts to religion; and the smaller groups begin to merge into one. And at some point Jesus poses the question that would start it all. And I picture him kind of looking down as he says it, in a nonchalant sort of way: *Who do people say that I am?* Everyone chimes in; some talk about those who say he's John the Baptist come back to life, or Elijah the great prophet or another prophet. They toss these names out there, and it brings smiles to their faces and even a few laughs here and there, although no one's quite sure why.

And then, while everyone enjoying the playful banter, Jesus changes the entire feel of the conversation with seven simple words: *Who do YOU say that I am?* And he's no longer walking when he asks this – in fact, he's stopped right there in the middle of the road and he's looking eye-to-eye at each of them – as least as I imagine it. I picture everyone walking with him stopping as well, abruptly, almost stumbling. The casual look on their faces has vanished – because this question isn't as innocent and benign as the first one. This isn't simply asking them to report on what others have said. It's asking them to look within themselves and say, out loud, what *they* feel, what *they* think, what *they* believe.

And I could be going out on a huge limb here, but do you know what I imagine? Silence. Lots of it, where the only sound heard is the cool afternoon breeze blowing through the trees on the side of the road to Caesarea Philippi. The full weight of the question rests heavily on each of the disciples, and they simply don't know what to say. They know what they *want* to say, but they can't bring themselves to say it; to actually voice the embodiment of the hope of the people for generations. And so they stand there in awkward silence, kicking dirt on the ground.

Until Peter speaks up. Which doesn't surprise me in the least, as I'm sure it didn't surprise the disciples either. Peter voices four words that resonate with every one of those other disciples and what they were thinking as well. Four words that would change the course of history: *You are the Messiah.*

Again, I know I'm embellishing the story, but somehow that vision makes sense to me. It is not by accident that the writer of Mark places this little exchange right in the middle of his gospel, as Jesus and the disciples make their way to Jerusalem. At some point, Jesus' identity had to be stated clearly, verbalized for all to hear. And while it

wouldn't be revealed to everyone until the cross, Peter's statement in the 8th chapter is a glimpse of things to come – baby steps.

But to think that this little story in the middle of the gospel is nothing more than an exchange between Jesus and his disciples is missing the point. The way that Mark writes it, the audience here extends far beyond the group of people walking on the road that day. *You and I* are part of this conversation – we have been all these years. And the question Jesus posed his followers then is the same question he asks his followers today: who is Jesus, really? Who do we say he is?

I mean, think about that for a minute. And don't take the easy way out and summon up all the fancy names and titles we use for him. There's an old tune called "Jesus, Name Above All Names." We used to sing in youth group all the time. The lyrics are nothing more than a string of names from scripture commonly associated with Jesus – *Emmanuel, God is With us, Blessed Redeemer, Living Word, Son of God*. It's a great song! But ironically, I don't know that singing the song and all those names ever really gets us in touch with this Jesus who is "above all names." I'm not sure if it ever helps all that much with the question, *who do we say Jesus is?*

So we have to go deeper than the names. And that's where the fun begins! I mean, how do we ever really *know* a person anyway? You ever wonder that? When you first meet someone, *anyone*, there's a fairly standard ritual of questions. It's not like there's some manual out there; it's just the questions that typically get asked. What's their name, where do they live, are they married, what music do they like. And the all-important question in Mayberry, it seems: where do you go to church?

And so you begin with the questions; and if the relationship develops a little more, there's a second level of knowing someone. But it's not through questions that you do this, as much as it's just gathered in general conversation. Like what kind of values shape their behavior and decisions; what their dreams and goals are. This is also when you gauge the other's trustworthiness, whether they possess the kind of integrity that's going to allow you reciprocate that trust. It kind of reminds me of a line from a song by a popular folk band these days:

*I wanna have friends that I can trust
that love me for the man I've become, not the man that I was.
I wanna have friends that will let me be
All alone when being alone is all that I need¹*

I think The Avett Brothers are on to something there. The way we know another person – *really* know them – is not through those first questions or titles or the info tab on their newly-redesigned Facebook page. The way we know someone is to take the long and winding journey to the heart of who they are. And the best way – some would say the *only* way – to get to that heart is in the context of the relationships of our lives – husband, wife, son and daughter, neighbor, church member, business colleague, cycling team member. It's in relationship that we most know someone.

And that might be the very reason that Jesus chose to ask this question when he did – when he was with his closest friends, in the context of their relationship and all the time they'd spent together. So when Peter says what he says, he was doing much more

¹ <http://www.cowboylyrics.com/lyrics/avett-brothers/the-perfect-space-28322.html>, visited on 2.11.2010.

than prescribing a title to Jesus. He is making a statement of faith – our statement of faith: *You are the Messiah, the son of God.* That's who he was to them. Who is he to us?

I'll tell you why that question is so critical for the church today – because of what Jesus does next. They've just had their little revelation experience, so a celebration would seem to be in order, right? Not so fast. Instead Jesus started telling them that the future isn't looking so good. He's going to suffer, he says; those in authority will reject him and even kill him. And it's important that we hear Jesus' words here not as American Christians in 2010 who are well-aware of the crucifixion. It's important that we hear his words as Jesus' original audience did – a group who was repulsed by the cross, a Roman punishment reserved for the worst of criminals; a scandalous shame not at all befitting of a just-affirmed Messiah!

Which is probably why Peter pulls Jesus aside for a little chit-chat; and we can let our imagination fill in the gaps: *Jesus, what are you doing? Cut it out! That's not going to happen, not to you. We're just getting started here. We've got a great future ahead of us! Don't say stuff like that! You're going to scare us off!* To which Jesus replies:

*If any of you want to become my followers,
Let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.
For those who want to save their life will lose it,
And those who lose their life for my sake will save it.*

Do you see now why that question is so incredibly important – *who do you say that I am?* Do you see why it changes everything?

So now we are walking along with Jesus on the road. And ultimately, what each one of us is looking for in this Jesus a depth of authenticity; one that sinks its roots deep into the “stuff” of life so that it's nurtured and withstands the coming storm. But the thing is, you and I, we don't hand our lives over easily. We don't transfer our allegiance on a whim. If we're going to turn our lives over to someone, we've got to know, in the most intimate of ways, who that person is to us. We've got to trust them and know the relationship is real.

That's a big question to ask. But the even bigger question, the one that *really* matters, is the one Jesus doesn't ask but certainly implies: *Now that we know who Jesus is, are we ready to follow him to the place where he is going? Now that we know who Jesus is, are we ready to follow him to the place where he is going?* That's where the rubber meets the road on our walk of faith, doesn't it? Because if following Jesus means we actually have to live it instead of just verbalizing it because it sounds nice to say; if following Jesus involves things like “taking up our cross” and “losing our life,” then we darn well better know who it is that's taking us there.

Are we willing to follow Jesus to the Sunday school classroom, where our children need us to share the story of our collective faith – are we? Are we willing to follow Jesus up the street to a sister church where people's hungry stomachs are fed every Thursday night – are we? Are we willing to follow Jesus to Mexico and the good works God is doing there, realizing that the fellowship of those who profess faith in Christ extends far beyond our borders – are we? Are we willing to follow Jesus into the brokenness of human relationships, when it would be easier to just look the other way – are we? Are we willing to follow Jesus on this journey of Lent we begin next week, as we look anew at

our calling and commitment to God's mission here – are we? Are we truly willing to follow Jesus where he is going? Are we truly willing to look for the Messiah among us?

That idea of “looking for the Messiah among us” comes from a story about an European monastery that had fallen on hard times and was close to shutting its doors, with only five monks left. One day the abbot went to seek advice from a wise old rabbi who lived in the woods. His only suggestion: *tell your brothers to look for the Messiah in your midst*. He shared this message with the others, and none of them knew what it meant. There were too many chores to be done, too many concerns to keep the monastery breathing. Still, they kept looking.

And over time, things changed. Attitudes changes. And most importantly, relationships changed. The more the monks tried to look for the Messiah among them, the more they got to know their fellow brothers better. They got to know more than just a name and a title. And they came to see the others around them not just as companions in their journey of faith, but part of the journey itself. And as all of this transpired, others started to notice. Outsiders became insiders, bringing others along. More monks came on board. A mission with the local poor was started. The monastery went from a place near death to a thriving, living entity. All because they found the messiah in their midst and followed him wherever he went.

My friends, this is the kind of thing that happens when we go head-first into Jesus' question, and come out ready to follow him wherever he goes – even when we know where he's going. This is what happens when, together, we allow authentic relationships of faith to nurture and thrive. And as we begin the Lenten season next Sunday, I challenge you during your 40 days walking on the road with Jesus to ask yourself who Jesus is to you, and to follow him forever. Who we say he is *matters*. It always matters. Thanks be to God. AMEN.