

A Question of Identity

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
On September 16th, 2018

Mark 8:27-38

The assigned Gospel reading for today in the common lectionary is Mark's version of the story of Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah and his subsequent difficulty in embracing exactly what that would mean for Jesus and for his followers. In Mark, this story is preceded by a scene where Jesus heals a blind man in two stages. When Jesus first touches the man's eyes, he sees in a distorted way, "I see people, but they look like trees walking." It is only after a second touch that his sight is restored to clarity. As you listen to today's scripture, notice how Peter correctly identifies who Jesus is—the Messiah, a deliverer sent from God. But when Jesus tries to bring what his Messiahship would mean into clearer focus, Peter simply can't bring himself to see it. He rebukes Jesus. Listen now for God's word to us

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?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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.'

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. 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 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.'

When we have memorial services at Immanuel—and we've had our share of them lately, haven't we?—after I begin with a statement that we are here to bear witness to the resurrection and celebrate the life of the deceased, we launch into a recitation, drawn from the obituary and other sources, of WHO that person was. The spouse of their husband or wife, the parent of their children, a sibling, an in-law, a person who worked in this or that profession, and held these particular jobs, and graduated from this or that college or professional school, served the country, and received this or that honor, and was a participant in this or that club, and loved taking part in this or that hobby or activity, and was a member or friend of this congregation, doing this or that here. All of those roles and titles, loves and activities, went into shaping that person's public identity. If you ask others in attendance at the service that day who the deceased was—and was to them—they might list any number of these things. But we always close the list with the statement that the person whose life we are celebrating was and is and will always be a child of God, the one who created, and redeemed, and sustained them and has even now welcomed them home. That's their deepest spiritual identity, tied up in God's love in Christ Jesus, and on days when so much else seems transitory, we claim that this is unshakeable.

Our passage for today begins with Jesus walking the road to Caesarea Philippi, a place formerly called Panais, which featured a shrine to the Greek god Pan, god of the woodlands and caves. Panais had been given by Caesar Augustus to Herod the Great in 20 BC and was then passed on by Augustus to Herod's son Philip, who built a city there and renamed it Caesarea. It became known as Caesarea Philippi to distinguish it from the more famous Caesarea on the coast of the Mediterranean. It was there, Matthew, Mark, and Luke say—there in a place *named after Caesar, tied to Herod's son, and dedicated to a Greek god*—that Jesus asks a question of identity to his disciples. He asks them, *Who am I?*

In what I think qualifies as good teaching technique, Jesus didn't start by asking them to give their own answer. "What are other people saying about me?" he asks. I see them milling around a bit. "Well, some people say that you are Elijah." And another disciple pipes up, "And others say you are John the Baptist." And a third one says, "Oh, and still others say, you are another one of the prophets."

They've had their ear to the ground. They're attuned to what the scuttlebutt is about him, and you get the sense that his disciples themselves are trying to figure out just exactly who this Jesus is—the one who in their sight healed the blind the deaf and the lame, the one who cured the sick and cast out demons, the one who challenged the religious authorities, the one who stilled a storm and fed five and then four thousand. That's when Jesus turns the question on them. Okay, that's fine. That's what other people say about me. But who do YOU say that I am?

That's the real question, isn't it? Not finally what other people say about this or that topic or issue, but what you think and say about it. Not what other people think about who Jesus is, who God is, but what you are willing to claim and stand for.

Sooner or later it comes down to that. Consider confirmation, for instance. We baptize babies or young children, and then eighth grade rolls around and we ask them to confirm the vows that were made on their behalf by affirming their faith in the God made known to us in Christ in public.

It's good to know what other people say. But there comes a time when somebody else's answers aren't enough. We have to answer for ourselves. I love that classic movie *City Slickers*. Billy Crystal's character, who is a NYC ad exec who is the midst of a sort of mid-life crisis, has gone out to a dude ranch out west with a couple of his friends. They're having conversations on the trail and they are being worked hard by the trail boss, an old salt named Curly, played by Jack Palance. You know Jack Palance? He's the guy who could do the one-armed pushups.

In one scene, Crystal's character is riding alone with Curly and they come upon a cow who is apart from the herd and the cow has gone into labor. As they dismount their horses, the old trail boss raises one bony finger and says to the ad exec, who is hanging on his every word, "The secret of life is one thing. Just one thing."

Crystal's character leans in, ready to take in some more wisdom from this old guy, ready to finally get an answer to his malaise, but Curly isn't saying a blessed thing more. So when the ad exec finally presses, "What is it? What is the one thing?" Curly replies, "Well, now. That's what you've got to figure out."

In the Christian tradition, we are bold to say that the God we know in Jesus Christ is tied up in the answer to that one thing, that secret of life. What we say about who Jesus was and is and always will be has implications for who we are and how we live.

When Jesus puts the question to the disciples, “But who do YOU say that I am?” it is Peter who responds, “You are the Messiah.” In Matthew’s Gospel, the writer has Jesus respond to Peter’s affirmation by exclaiming, “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah. God has revealed this to you. You are Peter, and on this rock I’m going to build my church and the gates of hell will never prevail against it.”

In Mark, there’s no such praise for Peter. Only Peter saying, *You are the Messiah*, and Jesus admonishing them, “Don’t tell anyone about this.”

It’s a rather puzzling admonition, until you consider that Jesus may think that people around him might misunderstand what it means that he is the Messiah. They may not really understand his identity.

That is borne out by Peter’s response after Jesus begins to tell them that the Son of Man is going to suffer and be rejected and killed and on the third day rise again. Peter replies the way any good friend might, by rebuking him. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark doesn’t tell us the content of Peter’s rebuke, but you can imagine with the other gospels that it’s something like, “God forbid, this is never going to happen to you.”

Of course Peter doesn’t want his friend and teacher to go through those things. Jesus himself might not want to have gone through them if he felt like he had a choice, which may be why he told Peter, “*Get behind me, Satan. For your mind is set not on divine things, but on human things.*” Peter, you see, represents a temptation to Jesus to set aside his fundamental identity. Peter represents a temptation to set aside what it meant that Jesus was called and destined to be the Messiah, to live into and out of that identity as God’s deliverer. But that identity is fundamental to who he is.

I think there’s a deeper reason beyond just the desire of a loved one to protect the one they love from harm that drives Peter’s response. It goes to the heart of how he—and the other first century Jews, and frankly, the rest of us a lot of the time—understood what it meant to be the Messiah, the one who brings God’s deliverance. It didn’t fit with Peter’s narrative about who the Messiah was to be. That narrative was tied up in stories of an Israelite judge like Samson or a king like David or even a foreign ruler like Cyrus wielding force, militarily or otherwise, to make things happen. It was built on accounts of how God’s anointed one kicked butt and took names. The notion that a Messiah would suffer and be rejected and die at the hands of his enemies absolutely did not fit that narrative. Jesus’ vulnerability ran counter to the narrative of what a Messiah was supposed to be. And the way Jesus lived out his own narrative of what a Messiah was creates a different narrative for all of us as we live into what it means to be God’s children, followers of that sort of Messiah.

On the front of your bulletin you see a quote from a character in Patrick Rothfuss’s novel *The Name of the Wind*. “*It’s like everyone tells a story about themselves inside their own head. Always. All the time. That story makes you what you are. We build ourselves out of that story.*”

Well, we talked about that at the lectionary group this week. We went back and forth over the utility of that quote. Is it true? Is it not true?

While I believe that there is a deeper and more fundamental identity to each of us than the stories we tell ourselves about who we are—and that our identity runs deeper than our public persona and the roles we play—I do think that the stories we tell ourselves help shape the way we view ourselves and they do help determine the way we live.

Yesterday I had the privilege of participating in Flynn Bucy's father Ralph's memorial service down in Harrisonburg. Flynn's father was a great old retired Presbyterian pastor who used to say to me every Sunday on the way out of church when he was here visiting—and he visited often—he would say to me, “Has anybody ever told you that you're a good preacher?” I was always a little nervous about what was going to come next! But he'd always go on, “Because you are.”

I told that story and a couple of other stories about Flynn's dad, and Lorraine's brother Paul Raushenbush told some stories, and Ralph's own pastor there in Harrisonburg told some stories. And at the end of the service everybody came over to us and said, “You were all talking about the same guy. Those stories you told all reflect who we knew Ralph to be.” Those stories that we told about Ralph and that he probably told himself shaped his life and they were all wrapped up, as each of us said, in the story and character of Jesus.

We are more than the stories we tell ourselves, or the stories others tell about us, to be sure. So I think it is important, yes, to begin every memorial service with a list of relationships and roles, affiliations and affinities, and that it is a marvelous and good impulse to share stories about our loved ones when we celebrate their lives. But I always end by going back to the claim that we are children of God. At root, whether the stories we tell ourselves or about ourselves make it clear or not, we are children of a loving God.

But here in the church we claim one thing more, we also claim that we are followers of Jesus, a Messiah whose stories we tell week in and week out—day in and day out, some of us. And, if the Holy Spirit has anything at all to do with it, those stories shape the stories we tell ourselves about who we are.

Because we are disciples of Jesus, we too take up our cross. We don't return evil for evil. We forgive people who have hurt us. We welcome the stranger and the outcast and the outsider. We love and pray for people who hate us. We turn the other cheek. And we know that our worth is not finally tied up with what we do, what clubs we're in, whether or not we have a job, how much money we make, or anything else like that. Our worth is tied up in our connection to the one who showed us how to live.

So, a quick story. My in-laws, who live at Emerald Isle on the coast of North Carolina, decided not to evacuate in the face of Hurricane Florence.

I was not a fan of that decision. Oh, I sort of understood it. They don't live on the island. They live on the mainland across from it, inland, maybe half a mile. The point is, they stayed. My mother-in-law and father-in-law, my brother-in-law and his wife, their two strapping sons and their daughter.

My brother-in-law is a contractor and his boys work for him. When other children received toy power tools at the age of five, six, and seven years old, my nephews got real power tools! Roger's company is Roger and Sons, now.

I think one of the reasons that Roger didn't pack up the whole family and evacuate is because he knew that once the storm blew through, he would be needed. So yesterday he and his sons were out with chain saws, helping other people. Helping clear roads, looking out for his neighbors and their properties.

Roger has spent every single Sunday of his life listening to stories about Jesus. In Jesus' name. Amen.

