

September 15, 2024

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 8:27-38 (NRSV)

pg. 43, NT Pew Bible

²⁷Jesus 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?” ²⁸And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

²⁹He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹Then 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. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But 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.”

³⁴He 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.

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

Holy Wisdom, Holy Word

Identity Theft

A quotation that’s slowly becoming dear to me is this one from poet and novelist, Rainer Maria Rilke: “Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live

everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.”

I say, “slowly becoming dear” because unsolved questions and locked rooms still cause me a great deal of anxiety. I *aspire* to “love the questions themselves,” but most of the time, I ache for certainty. And yet somehow, despite my fears, Rilke’s quote calls to me powerfully, perhaps because “living the questions” is dynamic, personal, and intimate in a way that “knowing” static truth is not. To love the questions is to hold mystery and possibility close to my heart, to allow them to work on me, shape me, transform me.

As they make their way through the villages of Caesarea Phillipi, Jesus invites his disciples to live into a question. “Who do you say that I am?” he asks them. *Who am I? Where do I stand in this life we’re making together? What do I mean to you?*

But wait, you might say. *That’s* not the kind of question Rilke is talking about. *That’s* a creedal question. A heart-of-our-faith question. It’s a question we Christians must know the definitive answer to. Jesus is our Savior. He’s Lord. Redeemer. King. Messiah. Christ. *God*. The only begotten Son of God. There’s nothing “unsolved” about Jesus; our Savior isn’t a locked room. He’s the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Yes. Yes, he is. And *yet*. If this week’s Gospel reading has anything to say about it, we are *still* meant to live the question of who Jesus is, day by day and hour by hour. We’re not meant to “solve” him once and for all. As hard as this might sound, we’re not meant to land on an answer, we’re meant to journey with it.

As Mark tells the story, Jesus, being the teacher par excellence that he is, prefaces his hard question with an easier one: “Who do people say that I am?” In other words, *what’s the word on the street? What have you heard? What do the opinion polls tell about me?*

I don’t know about you, but I can just about hear the schoolboy relief and excitement in the disciples’ voices (“Ooh, ooh! This is an easy one! I know this one!) as they scramble to answer Jesus’s question: “People say you’re John the

Baptist!” “No, no, they say Elijah! More people say ‘Elijah!’” “No, lots of folks say one of the prophets! I’ve heard them talking about it! They’re sure you’re one of the prophets!” I’m guessing they go on for a while, each trying to drown the other out with the most succinct and promising answer they can come up with. After all, this is solid ground. Clear, fact-based, truth-telling. They can *do* this.

Interestingly, Jesus neither affirms nor denies any of their answers. He simply listens to them, allowing the disciples to offer up everything they think they know, based on other people’s expertise. As if to say: this is the place to begin. This is where all explorations of faith begin, in naming what we’ve heard, examining what we’ve inherited, and parroting back the certainties others have handed down to us. These answers cost us little or nothing, so they’re safe and benign. But of course, they don’t offer us much in return, either. They harken back to history and tradition, and that’s not a bad thing. But there’s no life in them. No intimacy. No real passion.

So, Jesus presses on. “Who do *you* say that I am?” he asks next, looking at each disciple in turn. Meaning: *forget about other people’s theologies and interpretations. Put aside tradition and creed, valuable as they are, and consider the life we have lived together thus far. The bread we’ve broken, the miles we’ve walked, the burdens we’ve carried, the tears we’ve shed, the laughter we’ve shared. Who am I to you?*

Mark doesn’t give us much detail about the scene, but when I imagine what happens next, I see the disciples falling into a long, awkward silence. I imagine them avoiding eye contact with Jesus. Shuffling their feet. Clearing their throat. Casting anxious glances at each other. I imagine every single one of them desperately hoping that someone else will answer. And I imagine Jesus, standing patiently and vulnerably in their midst through that long silence, waiting to hear what his closest friends will say about him. Do they know him? Have they learned to trust his heart and his words? Do they really *love* him?

Cue Peter. Bold, reckless, earnest, impetuous Peter. When the silence becomes unbearable, he throws himself forward and answers the question as confidently

as he can: “You are the Messiah.” A perfect, A-plus answer. The whole gospel story in a nutshell. The Truth with a capital “T.” Right?

Wrong. Or, at least, not quite. Because this is where the story gets weird. Instead of praising Peter’s discernment, Jesus tells him to keep his mouth shut, and immediately launches into a grim description of the suffering and death that await him in Jerusalem. He paints a picture so bleak, so upsetting, and so counter-intuitive, Peter pulls him aside and tells him to knock it off. But this — Peter’s insistence that Jesus fit into *his* watered-down understanding of Messiahship — hits a nerve so raw, Jesus turns and rebukes Peter in turn. What’s more, he does so using words that shock us still, two thousand years later: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Poor Peter. Where did he go wrong?

Well, he gets the “answer” right. The title. The identity. “You are the Messiah.” But when Jesus challenges Peter’s understanding of what Messiahship entails, Peter cringes in embarrassment. In disbelief. In shame. As in: “No, that’s not what I signed up for. That’s not how I want my Messiah to behave. Torture? Crucifixion? Humiliation? What kind of Messiah chooses to give up? To surrender? To *die*? You want me to associate myself with you, and *lose* everything?”

As strange and stinging as this exchange is, there is something that is endearing about it. It gives us a bit of insight as to the relationship between Peter and Jesus, that they are intimate enough friends to survive an argument. Only friends who are powerfully bonded can tell each other off so harshly and live to tell the tale together afterwards.

More importantly, I love that Peter’s confession of faith — “You are the Messiah” — signals the *beginning* of his exploration of Jesus’s identity, not its end. As soon as Peter thinks he has the answer to the question nailed down, Jesus shuts him up, challenges what he knows, and nudges him back to the starting line: *Yes, I am the Messiah. But no, you don’t really know what the word “Messiah” means. In*

fact, you're not even ready to know what "Messiah" means; you can barely tolerate my talking about it. There's so much more for you to learn, Peter. So many more answers for you to grow into. Be patient. Don't force the locked doors. Try to love what is unsolved. Keep living the question.

When I think about the entirety of Peter's story — all the biographical details that we 21st century Christians have the privilege to know and ponder — I'm stunned by the answers that Peter must have lived into as time went on. "Who do you say that I am?" *You're the one who said "Yes, come out on the water with me." You're the one who caught me before I drowned. You're the one who washed my feet while I squirmed in shame. You're the one who told me that I'd be a coward on the very night you needed me to be brave. You're the one I denied in order to save my own skin. You're the one who looked into my eyes when the rooster crowed. You're the risen one who found me on the beach and spoke love and fresh purpose into my humiliation. You're my Messiah.*

With his second question, Jesus asks his followers to put aside other people's interpretations and articulate their own. It's not enough, he implies, to recite the creeds, the traditions, the theologies, the abstractions. It's not sufficient to rely on other people's answers. At some point, our faith must become personal. Intimate. Invested. Description must yield to confession. Who do *you* say that I am?

As I reflect on Peter's very human, very earnest but misguided response in this story, I'm left wondering what kind of Messiah I want. I know the "right" answers to Jesus's question about his identity. Who do I say Jesus is? The Son of God. The Savior. The Redeemer. The Christ. But do I have my own agenda when it comes to what Messiahship means? An agenda shaped around my own comfort? My own priorities and preferences? Do I look away in embarrassment when God challenges that agenda?

Who do *you* say that Jesus is? It's a question to ponder for a lifetime. A question that has so many others folded into it: What stories of Jesus have you inherited? What "truths" about him do you need to say goodbye to? How might you be blessed by his loving rebuke? Is he merely *the* Messiah? Or is he yours?

What Peter learns in this encounter is that Jesus is just as powerfully present in the questions as he is in the answers. Maybe even more so. To love what is unsolved is not to deny Jesus his Lordship. It is to allow Jesus to enter more deeply into your heart than any impersonal truth about him will ever do. Live the question. That's Jesus's invitation, and he makes it over and over again, in love.

Commission & Blessing

Go out with your minds set on the things of God.

Take up your cross and follow Jesus.

See to it that the words of your mouths
and the thoughts of your hearts
are acceptable to God and enlightening to all.

And may God make the holy Word known to you;
May Christ Jesus lead you in the ways of sacrificial love;
and may the Holy Spirit set you ablaze with divine wisdom.

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord. ***Amen.***