

Who Do You Say That I Am?

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Text: Mark 8:27-9:1

Last month our family went on vacation up to Boston. And I was really excited to take this trip. I was looking forward to showing our kids around a city where my wife and I had lived before moving to New Jersey. I was looking forward to visiting all our familiar haunts—Faneuil Hall and Quincy Market, Boston Common, the Public Garden. But most of all I was looking forward to being able to wear my Boston Red Sox cap without disapproving looks and snide comments. I fell in love with the Sox during their magical 2004 season, when they won the World Series for the first time since 1918, and I don't think I could ever shake the wonder and the excitement of cheering them on that year through the playoffs and the championship. It's a part of my history, and it's become a little piece of who I am.

Who are you? It's a simple question to ask, but maybe less simple to answer. Your family relationships—being a husband or wife, father or mother, son or daughter—shape the events of your life, perhaps even how you spend most of your day. On the other hand, the fact that I was in Mrs. Bzdewka's fifth-grade class thirty years ago is something true about me, something that at one time was a really meaningful part of my life, but is now part of the background, with so many other far more important pieces of me taking center stage. When you answer that question about your identity, "Who are you?", the most meaningful answers are going to be the things that shape what you do, what you value, what you choose, how you spend your time and money, where you invest your sweat and blood.

"Who do people say that I am?" Jesus asks in the passage of scripture we read today. When he asks this, he's not just looking for gossip or idle chit-chat that the disciples may have overheard. "Who do people say that I am?" is a question about the expectations people have of Jesus. What do they suppose Jesus is going to do? John the Baptist preached God's judgment. Elijah showed God's power. The prophets spoke God's messages. Jesus has done all of these things, but he doesn't claim any of these identities.

"Who do *you* say that I am?" Jesus asks his disciples, making the question more personal. Now the disciples have to stake a claim to their own expectations of Jesus. Peter is the only one to answer, saying, "You are the Messiah."

In some versions of the story, Jesus praises Peter for his insight, but in Mark's gospel, Peter doesn't get credit for the right answer. Messiah means "anointed"—nothing more, nothing less. When Jesus starts to teach the disciples what being the Messiah means, that it means being condemned and suffering for others, Peter can't handle it. Maybe he wants a conquering military Messiah, or a righteous high priest who takes over the reins of power in Jerusalem. But not a convicted criminal, not someone who suffers rejection and death. That's the opposite of who he thinks the Messiah ought to be. Because when Peter called Jesus "Messiah," he wasn't just staking a claim about who Jesus is. He was staking a claim about himself. Being a follower of a powerful

conqueror is very different than being a follower of an executed criminal. When Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?", Peter's answer doesn't just define Jesus' identity. It defines his own.

And lest Peter, lest any of us, fail to get the point, Jesus calls the crowd together and tells them all quite openly what it means to follow this Messiah who's meant to be rejected and crucified and raised: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves..." This is a hard saying, and so I think it's worthwhile to think a little bit about what this means. The word that the gospel writers--Matthew, Mark, and Luke--use to capture what Jesus said is the Greek word ἀπαρνείσθαι. In the whole New Testament, this word is used only 14 times--in this story, and also in the story about Peter denying he knows Jesus after Jesus is arrested. It means the opposite of "recognize," the opposite of "acknowledge." "I tell you, I do not know this man," says Peter when the bystanders accuse him of following Jesus. He refuses to acknowledge Jesus, because he doesn't want to share his fate. By denying Jesus, Peter wants to separate himself, not only from Jesus, but from the execution he knows Jesus is about to suffer.

So, when Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves..." Jesus is telling us to take Peter's denial... and turn it inward on ourselves: "I tell you, I do not know this woman... this man." But what is the self Jesus is asking us to deny? Is it our physical bodies? Some Christians through the years have thought so, but God made us physical beings within a physical creation that God calls *good*. God created us, body, mind, *and* spirit, in God's image. Jesus can't be asking us to reject God's artistry.

God made us whole and beautiful. But that's not how we usually experience ourselves. Somewhere along the way we were cut up into a million little puzzle pieces, jumbled, stained, and damaged so they don't even fit together properly anymore. That's the destructive power of sin, the vicious power of brokenness in our world. Broken relationships, broken families, broken economic and political systems, broken habits and ways of living--we cling to our puzzle pieces jealously, afraid of giving them up, afraid of having nothing. Confusedly, powerlessly, we give in and become ensnared in brokenness, we become part of the problem. That's what addiction looks like. That's what institutionalized systemic racism looks like. And every action, from excessively berating a child out of frustration to something as seemingly innocent as buying a wastebasket at a big box store (made by whom? where?) sticks us more tightly to the web of sin and brokenness. The more tightly we cling to our jumbled puzzle pieces, the less sure we can be about who we are. The apostle Paul is talking about this confusion and alienation from ourselves when he writes, "I do not understand my own actions." (Remember how we said who we are is tied up in what we do, what we choose?) He continues, "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ... But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells in me" (Romans 7:15,17).

This is the self Jesus wants us to deny--the self clinging to the half-truths and lies that blind us from seeing God's image in us, and from living as bearers of that image. It's the fearful self, afraid to risk the comfort of its routines and prejudices for something greater and more beautiful. It's the avaricious self, clinging tightly to money, time, energy that seem to be in such short supply. It's the willful self, so jealous of its own priorities and goals that it makes no room for others... or for God. It's the chameleon self, so eager to please others, so eager to conform to their needs and expectations, that it loses the characteristic form God gave and blessed. Jesus says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves..." let them turn their back on all these false and destructive ways of being, let them say, "I do not know this man... this woman. I

don't want to share her fate. This isn't me." That's why we have a confession of sin in our worship service--it gives us space to acknowledge that we all need God's forgiveness and healing and transformation, not just in a small part of our lives, but for our whole selves.

But what's left? What do we have to hold onto after we separate ourselves ... from ourselves (or from what we thought we were)? Are we left empty-handed? Jesus offers us an alternative way of living to those who deny themselves: "If any want to become my followers, let them ... take up their cross..." Over the years, we've weighted down this phrase with a lot of unnecessary baggage. Jesus talks about bearing the cross, he's offering us a choice: "If any want to become my followers," he says. It's important to realize this, because too often we use this expression in another way, with a meaning quite different from what we read in the gospel. When someone is suffering an illness, an addiction, a loss, or another ongoing hurt we say, "it's his cross to bear, it's her cross to bear." But we know that Jesus didn't leave people to struggle on their own with these hurts--he healed those with diseases, and turned mourning into joy when he raised the dead. So when Jesus talks about bearing the cross, he's not asking us simply to live with the tragedies that happen to us. He's offering us an invitation to a hard and joyful way of life.

Jesus is offering us an invitation to lead the kind of life he led. Some years later, Paul wrote in a letter to the Galatians, "Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (6:2). For Jesus, bearing the cross meant shouldering the burdens of hurt and guilt that belonged to others. The story of Jesus means this: God chose to be born into a peasant family living in an occupied country. God chose to share our grief when we lose friends and family to death. God chose to know temptation, loneliness, and fear the same way we feel them. God chose to submit to human injustice and violence. God chose to share death with us, and to overcome it with new life. The story of Jesus is a story about a God who bears our burdens and overcomes them. But it's also a story about a man who found such joy and fulfillment in doing God's will, in loving the people God loves, that he was willing to undergo all these things for us. That's the kind of life he invites us to lead.

We bear one another's burdens when we care for one another in the way that God cared for us in Jesus--not from above, not from outside, but as one who shares our brokenness and fear. We bear one another's burdens when we listen to someone's troubles so intently that they begin to feel like our own, when we lift them up to God together. I mentioned our confession of sin earlier... Even if you don't feel guilty today, when you pray together with sinners asking for forgiveness as part of this community, you're helping to bear their burdens, and you can feel secure that when the Spirit moves you to offer your own brokenness to God, there will be others standing beside you. This way of living helps to color the way we serve other people, too. Sometimes serving feels like we're full of money, time, and energy to give away, and "charity" is about filling the empty vessels that come our way. I think Jesus' invitation brings us to a richer, fuller way to serve others.

Some of you have showed us this week what it means to bear the cross. Some of you provided food or hospitality to a homeless family staying in Allendale on Friday night. Some of you have visited with the Chen family as they grieve. Some of you come week in and week out to be renewed in your identity as a bearer of the cross, and to come alongside and help others carrying heavy burdens. "Who do you say that I am?" asks Jesus. And if our answer, with Peter, is, "You are the Messiah," that's something that doesn't touch just our mind, our beliefs. It flows outward into an entire way of life, turning aside from the jumbled and confused identity we choose for ourselves to one

that is rooted in the story of Jesus, and one that comes, in the end, with a promise: "there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power" (Mark 9:1).

Who do you say that Jesus is? Who do you say that *you* are? I'm a man caught up in the world's brokenness, in need of God's forgiveness. But I'm also a follower of Jesus, who graciously invites me to bear the cross, to help bear the burdens of others. Jesus invites us to bear the cross, but that doesn't mean we should try to *be* Jesus. Jesus doesn't ask us to replace him--he invites us to *follow* him. We can walk the road Jesus walked only because he walked it first and leads the way. We can bear one another's burdens only because we shoulder them together, as the community gathered by Jesus, who carries us all into God's Reign. Amen.