



“But Who Do You Say That I Am?”

Rev. Dr. Michael L. Gregg

September 16, 2018

Mark 8:27-38

Evangelist and author, Tony Campolo tells the story of when well-known preacher, Fred Craddock was on holiday in Tennessee. He and his wife were having dinner at a restaurant when an old man started talking to them, asking them how they were doing and if they were enjoying their holiday. When the old man asked Fred what he did for a living Fred saw the chance to get rid of him – “I’m a preacher.” “A preacher? That’s great! Let me tell you a story about a preacher.” The old man sat down at their table and started to speak. As he did, Fred’s annoyance was changed to one of profound humility. The old man explained that he grew up a discarded and illegitimate child. He was born without knowing who his father was, which was a source of great shame in a small town in the early twentieth century.

One day a new preacher came to the local church. The old man explained that as a youth he had never gone to church, but one Sunday decided to go along and hear the new pastor preach. He was good. The boy went back again, and then again. In fact, he started attending just about every week. But his shame went with him. This poor little boy would always arrive late and leave early in order to avoid talking to anyone. But one Sunday he got so caught up in the sermon that he forgot to leave. Before he knew it, the service was over and the aisles were filling. He rushed to get past people and out the door, but as he did he felt a heavy hand land upon his shoulder. He turned around to see the preacher, a big tall man, looking down at him asking, “What’s your name, boy? Whose son are you?” The little boy died inside, the very thing he wanted to avoid was now here. But before he could say anything the preacher said “Oh, I know who you are. I know who your family is. There’s a distinct family resemblance. Why, you’re the son, you’re the son, you’re the son of God!”

The old man sitting at Fred Craddock’s table said “You know, mister, those words changed my life.” And with that he got up and left. When the waitress came over she said to Craddock and his wife, “Do you know who that was?” “No” they replied. “That was Ben Hooper, the two-term governor of Tennessee.”

I don’t know about you, but sometimes I struggle to figure out who I am. I tend to question what I’m meant to do. Who am I? Where do I fit in? What is my purpose in the world? In our culture today, we tend to focus a great deal on someone’s psychological makeup, or their outward appearance, or their abilities. We see one another as stand-alone islands, adrift in a vast lifeless ocean. We care so much about our own selves that we neglect to see how God is forming us together into a community of faith.

I read something recently in a social science commentary. Two researchers named Malina and Rohrbaugh were talking about personality and said this, “In contemporary North American

culture we consider an individual's psychological makeup to be the key to understanding who he or she might be. We see each individual as bounded and unique, a more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness and judgment that is set over against other such individuals and interacts with them. This sort of individualism has been and is extremely rare in the world's cultures and is almost certainly absent from the New Testament."¹

Did you catch that? Getting your identity separate from community is nowhere in the New Testament. We are not meant to do this life alone. But isn't that how it feels sometimes? That we are fighting and fussing over our lives and seem to be going it alone? We feel abandoned, fatherless or motherless. We feel aimless, ashamed of our pasts or our decisions in life? We don't feel like daughters and sons of God. We don't feel like we are important. We don't feel like we will be remembered after we have left this earth. We simply don't feel like we are living into our legacies as children of the Divine. So, in the text for today, I can understand the angst of Jesus' response to his disciples as they struggle to comprehend his mission in the world. I can understand why the disciples didn't really get it and didn't know who Jesus was. And I find myself asking the same question as Jesus. Who do you say that I am? Friends, who do you say that I am? Beloveds, who do you say that I am? God, who do you say that I am?

Poet and Cleric in the Church of England, John Donne, penned a poem I find to be important as we continue to discover who we are and our place in this world. He says:

No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less.
As well as if a promontory were.
As well as if a manor of thy friend's
Or of thine own were:
Any man's death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind,
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.

Because I am involved in humankind, in all of God's creation, we, as people of faith and the beloved of God, we are connected to each other in profound and important ways. When someone dies, we all mourn. When someone is sick, we all hurt. When someone celebrates, we all smile. If we are truly to be followers of this Christ who asked the question, "Who do you say that I am," then we must actually think about who Jesus was. Jesus was bound to his community, to his followers, and through his sacrifice and death, Jesus is bound to us today.

¹ Malina and Rohrbaugh *Social Science Commentary* pp see: Dyadic Personality, 16:13-20)

For you see, we can't think of Jesus in individualistic ways, as a powerful, lone-wolf healer who didn't need anyone around him. No, in Jesus' time, the view of the individual didn't exist. Each person was connected to the other and every person's identity was embedded in a group and community. Those two social scientists say this: "In the Mediterranean world of antiquity such a view of the individual did not exist. There every person was embedded in others and had his or her identity only in relation to these others who form a fundamental group. For most people this was the family, and it meant that individuals neither acted nor thought of themselves as persons independent of the family group. What one member of the family was, every member of the family was, psychologically as well as in every other way. Mediterraneans are what anthropologists call 'dyadic,' that is, they are 'other-oriented' people who depend on others to provide them with a sense of who they are."²

To follow Jesus, we should never be an island. We must always understand ourselves in relationship with others. The only question is who we will follow to make the best of who we can be. Malina and Rohrbaugh, the social scientists, said that Mediterranean people did not self-define, but that they took their identity from others – especially from family.³ This seems to suggest that the question Jesus asks of who people say that I am, is not Jesus testing the disciples, checking to see if they have "gotten it" yet. It wasn't Jesus looking for an answer from his unwitting friends. Jesus was asking, "Who do you say that I am," because he was wondering who he would connect with, follow, who he was now and who he was becoming. He was defining himself to his followers and showing them where his true power lies. If you know previous scripture in Mark, Jesus had already abandoned his identity which was defined by family and place. He was no longer Jesus of Nazareth, son of a carpenter. He was no longer Jesus the son of Mary. His family said many times that he was out of his mind. His old self was gone and so he became a traveler on the way. He got a new family, a surrogate family led by Peter, a family that wished to define him as the Christ, the Messiah.

So, we see that Jesus couldn't define himself outside of this surrogate family of followers. The household or family meant everything. It was not only the source of one's status in the community but also functioned as the primary economic, religious, educational, and social network. Loss of connection to the family meant the loss of these vital networks as well as loss of connection to land and identity. And human being that he was, he too had to decide who he would follow, and who he would imitate. Would Jesus be the powerful conqueror who would forcefully change the empire, or would he be the suffering servant who would sacrificially and radically change the world? "Who do you say that I am?"

Remember, Peter said he was the Messiah. And to that response, Jesus said, "Don't tell anyone!" Because that wasn't the right answer. Jesus wasn't Peter's understanding of a Messiah, a political and revolutionary leader, no, he was something else. And so, Jesus began to teach them that he would be something else, something more communal and sacrificial. He taught them who he really was, by saying, "But the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed." Jesus knew who he was. He was not the

² Malina and Rohrbaugh *Social Science Commentary* pp see: Dyadic Personality, 16:13-20

³ Malina and Rohrbaugh *Social Science Commentary* pp see: Textual Notes on Mark 8:27-30

Messiah, as Peter thought. He was different. He followed a different way, the way of the servant of God. For the early church this was exemplified in the Suffering Servant of Isaiah:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
 yet he did not open his mouth;
 like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
 and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
 so he did not open his mouth.
 Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain.
 When you make his life an offering for sin,
 he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days;
 through him the will of the Lord shall prosper.

Andrew Prior, an Australian minister, contends, “The greatness of Messiah, and the restoration of Israel, is found in service, which inevitably involves suffering because it stands against the place of power, against Caesarea Philippi.” This ragtag bunch of followers followed Jesus right to the borderlands of Israel. They were smack dab in the heart of the Roman Empire. Caesarea Philippi was the center of worship of the emperor and the Greek god Pan. The location of this exchange between Peter and Jesus was important. Asking who we are and what we are to accomplish in the world is not a safe question. We might just find out things we don’t want to know. And Jesus knew that Peter’s safe and secure understanding of a political and powerful Messiah, a Christ that would fulfill all of his expectations was holding him back.

So, Jesus took Peter and the rest of the disciples into a place, a foreign and hostile land that was exactly the opposite of safe and secure. The God that Jesus revealed was unsettling and upsetting, disruptive and disconcerting and there was no better way to get this point across than to ask Peter “who do you say that I am” in a distant and unfriendly place. I can imagine Peter’s response – “Wait, Jesus, you are asking me what? Right here? Right now? With these outcasts and foreigners around?” And Peter scrambled to understand who Jesus was in that time and place. But just like Jesus, God was no longer in the bounds of Israel. God was no longer behind the curtain in the Holy of Holies. God was no longer in the heavens. God was no longer confined and contained in a box we created. God is now out there, in the midst of the outcasts and the down and outs. God is among those considered the enemy. This means we don’t know where God will show up and that we must radically reorient our understanding of who Jesus is.

And Jesus asked this question, “Who do you say that I am,” and he asked it in this new and unnerving location because he wanted Peter to take another look, to view Jesus in this new place, at this new time, with a new outlook. Peter had to reevaluate what living in the Empire meant and what Jesus was to do. Jesus’s role had changed from supernatural savior to suffering servant, from political and military power to carrying a cross. Jesus and his disciples were in the land of the enemy and were now expected to carry the symbol of imperial terror on their backs.

But in the end, Jesus asked them to choose the cross. By choosing the implement of terrorism and death, the Jesus followers showed the Empire that they were not on their side, no matter how much safety and power the oppressor could provide. To choose to carry a cross was to choose to exit the empire and enter the way of suffering with Jesus. That’s who Jesus was. And that’s who

we are. Who we are is a people who must find community with each other and gain life by suffering for and with each other. Jesus was telling his followers that if they bowed to the Empire they would lose their lives and be defined by that which was Satan, by evil. But to save their lives they had to deny the paths to power, risk ridicule and rejection, and consciously and conscientiously follow the way of Jesus, even to the scary, beautiful borders of life.

Claire Wineland, a young and vibrant cystic fibrosis patient and activist, died at twenty-one years old a little over a week ago. I watched one of her inspirational videos where she talked about how some of the most beautiful and joyous moments in her life were the ones spent in a hospital room. She realized that most people think hospital rooms are stark, sterile, white rooms where people go to be sick. So, she decided to head to the Target down the street from the hospital and buy twinkling lights, throw pillows, and rugs in order to decorate her room with beauty.

Wineland went on to indicate that we should all live our lives with such beauty instead of waiting for someone else to define us. She said, “We are waiting to be healthy, waiting to be wealthy, waiting to find our passion, waiting to find our true love, before we actually start living. Instead of looking at what we have. Looking at all the pain. Looking at all the sadness. Looking at all the beauty. And making something with that.” She wanted people to know that through suffering comes innovation and art. And when we suffer we create something that contributes to the human race, that adds to the history of the world.

Can you imagine? Jesus knew he was going to suffer and die but he asked anyway, “Who do you say that I am? What beauty do you think I’m going to bring to the world? What powerful change will I accomplish in human history? Who do you say that I am?” We know who Jesus was. Who are you going to be?

Amen.