

Mark 8:27-38

“Again and Again: Hard Truths”

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Fred Lyon
at First Presbyterian Church, Gastonia, North Carolina
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The Second Sunday in Lent*

Jesus asks the disciples: “But who do you say that I am?”

There is a satirical treatment of Peter’s response that goes something like this:

Jesus said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God, who is the Alpha and Omega, the Kenosis, the eternal Logos, our Feeling of Absolute Dependence, our Ultimate Ground of Being.” And Jesus said, “What?”

Given the doctrinal industry with which Christianity has generated names to describe Jesus these past two thousand years, the question that Jesus poses to Peter—But who do you say that I am? —is still ours to grapple with today.

Who we say Jesus is indicates who we are and what we are willing to do for the sake of the reign of God. Amid all the voices raised throughout the centuries, amid all the voices still calling out around us today, Jesus’ question invites us to find our own voice and answer for ourselves.

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During the early to middle twentieth century, Albert Schweitzer was a renowned physician, medical missionary, musician, and theologian. He was also well-known for his biblical scholarship, which is on full display in his book entitled *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Toward the close of the book, Schweitzer considers the traditional language from the New Testament, which declares that Jesus of Nazareth is Jesus the Christ. Schweitzer points out that this identification of Jesus as the Christ comes to us from the first generation of Christians, that is, the first people ever faced with trying to figure out, and to put into words, who Jesus is.

These first Christians recognize that Jesus is “an authoritative ruler” and describe him “as Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God.” Such traditional titles have become central to our understanding of Jesus. But Schweitzer wonders if the Christ language about Jesus has become too traditional—too stuck in time, too stuck in centuries of a kind of lockstep familiarity—to still be fresh and relevant.

Schweitzer does not reject the traditional Christ language about Jesus. Instead, he wants us to be mindful that the primary source of our traditional Christ language about Jesus in the New Testament comes from a particular generation of ordinary people doing their

faithful best to answer the extraordinary question Jesus asks Peter, “But who do you say that I am?”

Thus, Schweitzer proposes that in every generation, people in general and Christians in particular have to decide anew—for themselves—what to do about this “authoritative ruler,” this Jesus in their midst. All—including you and me—must decide anew just who **we** say that Jesus is. Schweitzer puts it this way:

[Jesus] comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, he came to those...who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

Who do we say that Jesus is in 2021? How do we explain Jesus, how do we exemplify Jesus, how do we enact the compassionate love and loving compassion of Jesus in ways that are so full of life that they transform the hearts and minds of men, women, and children in 2021?

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My wife, Jan Edmiston, was giving a children’s sermon on today’s lesson from Mark. At one point, she said, “For those of us who believe, Jesus is the Christ.” Before Jan went further, our then eight-year-old son, Jay, piped up: “Even if you don’t believe, he’s still the Christ. He’s still the Christ, Mom.”

Maybe we should simply start with the premise that Jesus **is** the Christ. But then, what is the import of that identification in our present time and place? Who are we because Jesus is the Christ? What is the significance of our lives because Jesus is the Christ? How do we conduct our lives because Jesus is the Christ?

I ask this barrage of questions because of the particular wording of the question that Jesus asks. Most translations read: “But who do you say that I am?” However, the exact phrasing in the original Greek is much more penetrating. The question literally reads: “But you—who do you say that I am?” More colloquially, the question could go something like this: “But what about you? Who do you say that I am?”

“But what about **you**?” Identifying Jesus as the Christ eventually comes down to what you have to say about the matter. Not what your friends say, not what your Daddy or Mama says, not what your favorite professor or theologian says. No. What about **you**? What say **you**?

If you say Christ, what does the ‘Christ’ in Christian mean to you? How ready are **you** to deny **yourself**, to take up your cross, to follow this Jesus the Christ in what **you** think, say, and do?

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Last Sunday I suggested we navigate the season of Lent by spending:

- less energy on giving up and more energy on girding up
- less energy on guilt trips and more energy on gratitude trips
- less energy on grim determination and more energy on glad discipleship.

After further reflection this past week, it occurs to me that girding up and gratitude are building blocks for glad discipleship. Given the rigor of what Jesus expects of his disciples in this morning's lesson from Mark, I've been thinking of how "glad" can mean something beyond "being happy." I've been thinking of the more profound definition of "glad" that means "very willing." Because of this, I've been thinking about very willing discipleship. Very willing discipleship that remains very willing, even when—perhaps especially when—faced with two central and interrelated hard truths.

There's the first hard truth that a major feature of Jesus' resume for being Christ—indeed, the divine game plan for being Christ—is that he must undergo great suffering and be killed. Then there's the second hard truth that Jesus fully expects his disciples to follow him by willingly denying themselves and picking up their own crosses.

Yes, the hard truths are that Christ must undergo suffering and death; that a disciple must follow Christ by denying oneself and picking up one's own cross. How willing are we to follow that kind of Christ? How willing are we to be that kind of disciple?

All through the Christian year, but perhaps more especially during the forty days of Lent, we need to examine our willingness to put Christ first. By "put Christ first" I have in mind following the lead of Jesus when it comes to:

- loving God and neighbors and strangers and even enemies
- extending kindness and compassion to the least likely and most vulnerable
- proclaiming reign of God righteousness, mercy, and peacemaking that overwhelms all manner of worldly injustice, cruelty, and divisiveness.

We need to discern and pursue what nurtures our willingness to put Christ first. We need to discern and forego what hinders our willingness to put Christ first.

Denise Anderson reminds us that the "Lenten journey calls us to examine the things in which our hearts are invested. How important is comfort to us? Would we be willing to listen to hard truths and be changed by them even if it proved to be difficult?" She concludes that: "Again and again, we are implored to listen, especially when what we hear is unsettling."

Maybe we will know better who to say Jesus is the more we serve him with the deepest devotion we can muster. Here, I return to the words of Albert Schweitzer quoted earlier in this sermon:

Schweitzer writes: "[Jesus] speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time...." **To what tasks in our time is Jesus calling you and me?**

Schweitzer writes: “[Jesus] commands. And to those who obey, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship...” **What are the hardest truths of our Lenten journey that you and I must face and come terms with on the way to becoming more faithful, more hopeful, more loving disciples—no matter what the cost?**

Schweitzer writes: “...they shall learn in their own experience Who [Jesus] is...” **What have you and I learned about Jesus being the Christ through our own personal experiences, and are you and I willing to share that experience with others—willing to live that experience with others—in thought, word, and deed?**

I hope I have asked the kind of questions that nerve us to discover again and again the One who forever “speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time.” I hope so, because **now** is our time in the eternal design of God’s loving purposes—loving purposes to which Jesus calls you and me every day of our lives.

Christ for the world we sing—**now** is our time. The world to Christ we bring—**now** is our time. With loving zeal, fervent prayer, one accord, joyful song—**now** is our time.

Now—because God has given you and me **this** life. **Now**—because for you and me, there is no other time.