

**“Who Do You Say That I Am?”**

2 August 2020

Preaching Text: Mark 8:27-38

9<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Salado UMC, Salado, Texas 76571

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“Leadership is communicating to people their worth and potential so clearly that they come to see it in themselves” (Stephen Covey).

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We measure a person’s leadership ability by the quality of that person’s followers. For example, we judge teachers on the aptitudes imparted to learners. Or, when assessing leadership qualities of a political leader, we ask: does the leader help join the electorate together in cooperation for the communities’ common good? To be a leader is to define the mission for those led. It is a great and noble task. Plainly teaching is constantly near the heart of leadership and leadership development. Our morning’s text is an account of Jesus and the disciples in a learning setting. Jesus teaches; the disciples learn. A disciple is “one who learns.”

**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?" [28] And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." [29] He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." [30] And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.**

Here Jesus asks a question that the disciples answer from a popular sense of who others thought Jesus was. Jesus then asks them a personal question: “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answers presumably for all: “You are the Messiah.” Bold, direct, forceful—and no doubt true to a point. Still, we will soon discover what this means. We gauge integrity in confessing Jesus Christ by the steadiness in following Jesus on “the way.” Jesus now teaches the twelve the content of Peter’s confession.

**[31] 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. [32] He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. [33] 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."**

Jesus defines the mission. It is his prerogative, after all—he is the Messiah. He teaches 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” (8:31-32). Clearly, either Peter could not accept Jesus speaking about his own death or Peter opposed Jesus’ mission as Messiah. If it was the first reason, we surely understand Peter’s feeling. It seems easier to talk about our own death, than it is to speak of the death of someone we love.

Doctors diagnosed a church friend with pancreatic cancer. I would go over to his house and we would visit and watch baseball on TV (best pastoral visits ever). He could never understand what upset his wife

so about his condition. I listened to him talk about her “always falling apart” and how difficult it was for him to see her this way. Finally, I gently suggested “Maybe she is as torn up about your cancer as you are.” It is always difficult to hear someone you love speak about their own death.

Yet, for the second reason, if Jesus rebuked Peter because Peter disagreed with the Messiah’s mission, then Peter confused the disciple with the master. The master always defines the mission; not the disciple/learner.

**[34] 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. [35] 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. [36] For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? [37] Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? [38] 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."**

Here I think is the most curious part of the teaching. Jesus does not speak about the one issue that we might expect—death. As an alternative to death, Jesus speaks about shame. Jesus says, “Those who are ashamed of me . . . .” Jesus told them he is going to die, but here rather than encourage the disciples to hold fast, Jesus tells them to guard against shame. This seems odd.

Shame is “a painful emotion caused by a strong sense of guilt, embarrassment, unworthiness, or disgrace.” Jesus now fixes his life and words against human pride. As this phrase addresses shame, I think it also involves pride—contrary to shame—rather than death.

Jesus refers not to a healthy pride, recognizing God creating “human creatures a little lower than angels” (Psalm 8). Instead, Jesus addresses unhealthy pride—one that fears too much about what other people think. Is this not the unhealthy pride that makes too much of power, position, or accomplishment? This kind of pride even sneaks into the church. What are the disciples’ grounds for boasting when everyone learns that Jesus is the one who suffers and dies an ignominious death? Is it better to fear death than to fear what others think of serving a Lord like this?

Our concern with embracing pride and avoiding shame is one of the chief deterrents to a gospel mission to the world.

Let’s pause a moment. Let me ask a question: What do these three things have in common: Africanized honey bees, fire ants, and killer microbes? The answer is that as individual entities—single and alone—each is absolutely insignificant. But when 75,000 act in concert, as some bees from Africa did a few years ago on a hapless retired Presbyterian minister in Georgetown, it makes international news. Many of us would rather face a pack of dogs than 5000 bees on a mission. Rabid dogs are easier to organize against, and therefore, to run from or fight. Conceivably, we could say that pride in thousands of guises, divides the church much more than death.

What would happen to today’s disciples if we all acted with one accord and checked our egos at the door? What if we thought that cross bearing was more important than cross wearing? What if we saw service as something more precious than acclaim?

None of us is exempt from the ego and pride questions. These issues form our core and identity. As a mentor reminded me: “If you are truly great at something, there is no need to tell people. They will

recognize it without your having to point it out.” We offer service to Jesus for its own sake—not to brag or boast. It is its own good.

Most of us crave recognition and honor. And on the other hand, we will do almost anything to avoid shame. Yet, we believers measure the Christian life differently than the world measures.

Don’t you remember? Jesus enters a room. Jesus takes a towel and a basin. Jesus stoops down and washes the disciples’ feet (John 13:5). To Jesus’ way of thinking, and pointing to that for which his life is a sterling example, serving others in his name is all the pride necessary to enter the Kingdom of God.

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