

September 12, 2021

Mark 8:27-38

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

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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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.”

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

Debi Thomas, Journey with Jesus

Do you ever feel ashamed of your faith? Do you hesitate to identify as a Christian in your workplace? On social media? In the company of your classmates, your neighbors, your extended family?

I imply no judgment in the question, because my own (uncomfortable) answer is yes. Yes, I often struggle with shame when it comes to my faith. There are contexts in which I hesitate to identify as a follower of Jesus. I can name more than one instance in which I’ve hidden or minimized the essential role Christianity plays in my life.

So I come to this week’s Gospel, read the pointed words of Jesus to his followers, and cringe: *“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.”*

Ouch.

Perhaps you’re thinking: “Yes, but we have legitimate reasons to be ashamed. We *should* be ashamed of the terrible things Christians have done — and continue to do — in the name of Jesus. The shadow side of the faith is our legacy, too; how can we align ourselves with its horrors?”

I agree one hundred percent. The church (both historic and contemporary) has much to repent of and much to amend. The blood we’ve shed, the lies we’ve preached, the voices we’ve silenced, the powers we’ve abused — we can’t pretend that these profoundly consequential sins don’t affect us.

But the heart of this week's lectionary is not about the church. It's not about the failings of Christians. It's about Jesus. Jesus *himself*. What are we going to do about *Jesus*?

The reading begins with Jesus asking his disciples a straightforward question: "Who do people say that I am?" Or: "What's the word on the street? What assumptions are people making about me? Are you hearing any gossip? Any theories? Give me the scoop."

Apparently the disciples are hearing plenty, because they jump in with answers: "People say you're John the Baptist. Other people say you're Elijah! Actually, a lot of folks think you're one of the prophets."

I'm speculating here, but I wonder if the disciples also offer Jesus some of the harsher answers they've picked up during their travels: "Some people say you're a fraud. A heretic. A demon. A madman." "Some people say you're Mary's illegitimate kid." "Some folks think you're a traitor to Rome." "Actually, a lot of people don't care who you are — they just don't like you."

Interestingly, Jesus neither affirms nor denies their answers. He simply listens, allowing the disciples to offer up everything they think they know, based on other people's investigations, speculations, and assumptions. As if to say: this is an okay place to begin. This is how faith evolves. We name what we've heard. We examine what we've inherited. We parrot back the "certainties" others have handed to us.

Again, it's an okay place to *begin*, but it's not an okay place to stay. So Jesus follows up with another question: "Who do you say that I am?"

I'm guessing there's a long silence in the wake of this second question. I imagine the disciples shuffle their feet. Cough. Avoid eye contact with Jesus. Maybe they cast anxious glances at each other, each one hoping 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. Can they differentiate between the talk on the street and the witness of their own hearts? Are they willing to stake their lives on what they've experienced firsthand of Jesus? Do they really know him? Trust him? Love him?

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?

What happens next in the story brings us back full circle to the question we started with: are we ashamed of Jesus?

Cue Peter. Bold, reckless, impetuous Peter. When the silence becomes unbearable, he throws himself forward and tells Jesus exactly who he thinks Jesus is: "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 here, the story Mark tells gets very weird. Instead of praising Peter's prophetic answer, Jesus tells him to keep his mouth shut, and 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 Peter's rebuke hits a nerve so raw, Jesus turns and rebukes *him* in return. 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 does 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 Messiah-ship actually 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*?"

Peter's profession of faith — impressive though it sounds — signals the mere beginning of his spiritual journey. Not its end. As soon as Peter thinks he has Jesus nailed down, Jesus shuts him up, challenges what he knows, and nudges him back to the starting line: "Yes, I am the Messiah. No, you have no idea what "Messiah" means. In fact, you're not even ready to know what 'Messiah' means; you can barely tolerate my talking about it. You still want to mold me into your image of Messiah-ship. You still want to be in control. You still idolize your own comfort. You're ashamed to identify with the Savior I really am; you want someone more glamorous, more impressive, more aligned with your own definitions of power and greatness. Peter, there's so much more for you to learn."

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 Messiah-ship means? An agenda shaped around my own comfort? My own lifestyle? My own priorities and preferences? Do I look away in embarrassment when God challenges that agenda?

What about you? Are you ashamed of Jesus? Would you prefer a Messiah who aligns more easily with your social milieu, your political norms, your cultural expectations, your spiritual goals? Is the Jesus you follow a Jesus who dislikes the same people you dislike? Values the same comforts you value? Cherishes the same life goals you cherish? Or is he the Jesus who once made Peter flinch in shame? The Jesus of humility and surrender? Self-denial and sacrifice? Death and resurrection?

Who we think Jesus is will determine how far we'll go in following him. How large or tiny a cross we'll bear in his name. How fearlessly we'll profess him to a world that needs the love and healing he offers. How humbly we'll repent of the church's failures, and begin again to be Christ's hands and feet to those in need. How boldly we'll dedicate ourselves to sharing the paradoxical gospel of the cross, the grave, and the empty tomb.

The people in your life — who do they say Jesus is? Do you know? Do you ask?

You yourself — who do *you* say Jesus is? Do you know? Do you ask?

And finally, the Jesus you profess to know — are you ashamed of him and of his words? If yes, why? Is he deserving of that shame? If he isn't, what will it take to turn your shame into joy, surrender, obedience, and love?

