

Sermon on Mark 8:27-38
Susan Verbrugge
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
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Two plus two is four. 24 divided by 2 is 12. 9 times 8 is 72. So far, I'm good to go. But, if Jill left town A at 11:00 to drive to town B which was 100 miles away and drove an average of 50 miles an hour while eating a jelly doughnut and talking on her cell phone while Bob left town B at 11:30 to drive to town A and drove an average of 90 miles an hour while eating a Big Mac and texting Jill, where would they meet along the way and why didn't Jill answer Bob's text? I don't have a clue. And, I still have nightmares about questions like this on a test.

You see, I was never a wiz at math...especially beyond the basics. Just ask Jacob, my fifth grade son. I'm trying to keep up with his math. But, it's a challenge.

I do think that I remember that 16 divided in half is 8. Actually, I asked Jacob to double check my math, so I'm pretty sure I'm right. You see; there are 16 chapters in the book of Mark. Our reading for today comes from Chapter 8, smack dab in the center of the book. Could be that's just a coincidence. But, maybe it's in the center for a reason.

In this reading, Jesus asks what seems to be a simple question. At least, it seems simple on the surface. He says to his disciples, "Who do others say that I am?" Isn't that like saying, "What are others saying about me?" I don't know about you, but I would find that a tough question at times if a friend asked me the same thing. There might be some hard things that need to be said. It might be that the truth hurts a little bit.

But the disciples have a quick answer for Jesus. "Some say you are John the Baptist. Others say you are Elijah. Some say one of the other prophets." Good answer. Safe. No wounded feelings there.

Then, Jesus gets to the heart of the matter, though. "Who do you say that I am?" There it is. No mincing words. No beating around the bush. Amazingly, Peter, one of the disciples,

has an answer. And it seems he may be astonished that Jesus would even bother to ask the question. “Well, duh, Jesus. You are the Messiah. We all know that!”

Jesus doesn't commend or condemn Peter's answer, but he immediately tells the disciples not to tell anyone this answer. His response could be because their answer is too dangerous for him at that time in his ministry. If he is the Messiah as the disciples would have described the term, he would be a danger to those in power at the time. For the Messiah in the disciples' minds was to be the one who came in great power, with swords and shields and a great army. The Messiah was to become king and save the Jews from the oppressive Roman rulers. So, if the disciples let it leak that Jesus was that kind of Messiah, he would be targeted for death instantly.

Or it could be that Jesus tells them not to reveal their answer because he knows that they don't get it yet. That's why he immediately begins to tell them about his impending suffering, death, and resurrection. It's almost as if he quickly changes gears and tries a different way of describing what must happen to see if they can begin to understand this new way of being Messiah. But they still don't get it. “What are you talking about?” says Peter. “Things like that don't happen to the Messiah. Jesus, get ahold of yourself.”

And Jesus tries again. Exasperated this time, “Get behind me Satan. Try focusing on God's ways instead of the ways of the world for once! Don't you understand that to follow me, you will have to give up your selfish ways and take up your cross? You will have to lose your life. Don't you see? It's not easy. It's not glorious. It's hard!”

And so, the question echoes down through the ages to us. “Who do you say that I am? Susan, Joe, Libby, Steve, Jim, Bob, Anne, Martha...who do you say that I am?”

We, like the disciples, could just throw off the question as a “duh” sort of question. “Well, good grief, Jesus. We are all Christians here. Everyone knows that you are our Lord and Savior. We all had to answer that one correctly to become members in your church.”

But, what if we really allow that question to sink into our souls? “Who do you say that I am?” My guess is that the pat answer “Jesus is my Lord and Savior” would mean something different to each person in this sanctuary. And to any individual in this place, it meant something different a few years ago or even a few days ago than it means today or that it will mean a few days and years from now.

You see, we are all on a journey, separately and together. And that journey brings us to different stages of relationship with Jesus along the way.

The Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, gave two speeches within the course of a week. In the first, he was asked a question. He gave his answer. In the second speech, he was asked a very similar question. And, he gave a different answer. One man happened to attend both speeches. He stood up and said, “Wait a minute. Last week, you were asked the same question, and you gave a very different answer. Why are you being so inconsistent?” The Dalai Lama replied, “You are quite right. This week, I gave a very different answer. That is because between the time of the speeches, I have learned something.”

For us, the same can be true. We can learn something along the way. And we can answer the question from Jesus very differently. The more I encounter on this earth, the more I realize that there is no “final answer” to this and so many other questions. And, we are called to live in the questions.

But, says, Jesus, the answer to his question should always be focused on Godly ways and not the world’s ways. Forget answers that have anything to do with the world’s power and the marks of success in this world. Instead the answer must always be about losing your own life in order to follow Jesus, giving up the way the world might define you, to allow your discipleship to define you. You must be willing to follow the One who suffered enormously, who died on a cross, and who rose again. The answer must entail losing yourself in order to give all of yourself to the one who gave himself for all people. Saying that Jesus is Messiah, Lord and Savior, “calls for an altered image and demands an altered self” says Fred Craddock.

“Who do you say that I am?” Maybe this question is in the center of the Gospel of Mark because it is the center of who we are to be in this world. It is the question we should always be hearing from Jesus as though he were standing before us. It is not a question to be taken lightly. It is a question meant to alter our lives. And, our answer should be found in our words and our actions as we proclaim who Jesus was and who Jesus is, now and forevermore. Amen.