

“Who Are You?”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Mark 8: 27-38

When someone asks you, “Who are you?” how do you respond? Many times, we will give them our name, where we are from, if we are a student, what grade we are in. If it’s a work context, we might identify which department we work in, or what role we play in the company. If it’s a family reunion, we might identify who we are related to and if we are a blood relative or an in-law. If it’s in our neighborhood, we might identify with which house we live in and on what street, and how long we have lived there. There are many different ways to answer the question, “Who are you?”

Usually, when someone asks me, “Who are you?” I’ll give my name, I’ll say that I live in Pike Township in Indianapolis, and that I am married and have two daughters, one a junior at Pike High School and another a first-year student at Davidson College. If it’s a non-church gathering, and they press me for more information, I’ll share that I grew up in West Virginia, that I enjoy playing golf and working on projects around the house, and I love to travel. If I’m in a church-related gathering, I’ll share that I’ve been pastor of John Knox Presbyterian Church for fifteen years, and that my wife, Debbie, is also a minister and is a chaplain at IU West Hospital in Avon.

But you know what? If I’m in a non-church setting, I will often hold off on sharing what I do until I’m absolutely forced to share it. Maybe that’s because I’ve learned through the years that when people find out I’m a minister, they either clam-up and won’t say anything after that, or they will ask me one religious question after another, thinking that’s the only topic of conversation I can relate to. My favorite setting for this situation to take place is on the golf course. I’ll get paired-up with some guys I’ve never met. Over the first couple of holes, they will hit some bad shots and start saying a few choice words – Jerry Carter used to call it “golf talk.” And then, on the third or fourth hole we start talking about what each of us does for a living. When I tell them that I’m a minister, they get this look on their face like they’ve seen a ghost. That is until I start sharing my own “golf talk” at bad shots I make during the round!

Why am I so guarded about letting others know that I am a pastor? I think it speaks to the larger issue we all face as it relates to our identity. Our identity is formed through many different factors, through the eyes of many different people, and through our own lenses of self-reflection. We may want others to know us for certain factors – our personality, how we treat others, our family connections, and yes, our occupations. But what is out of our control is how people will form their opinions based on those factors, whether those opinions are realistic or not. When I tell someone that I am a fifth-

generation Presbyterian minister in my family, too many times they get this impression that I'm holier than all. But the truth of the matter is, that has been a part of my identity that has always caused wrestling and struggle for me: embracing my own sense of call versus the feeling that I just went into "the family business."

Who are you? What is your identity - as a human being, as a child of God, as a disciple of Jesus Christ? How do you understand God shaping your identity for a life of service? Who are you?

These are the same questions that Jesus poses in our passage today from the Gospel of Mark. Consider for a moment the relationship Jesus and his disciples have shared up to this point. It's generally believed that Jesus was around 30-years-old when he began his adult ministry, and which began with the calling of the disciples to follow him. Then, it was about three years later that he was crucified on the cross, and three days later he rose from the grave. So, we have, let's say, a three-year window in which the disciples are getting to know Jesus. In a way, they have progressed from a surface-level knowledge of him to the next, deeper level. And yet, there is a great, great deal of mystery surrounding him, something that is evident throughout the gospels in how the disciples interact with their Lord.

When we read this passage from Mark's Gospel, Jesus and the disciples had probably been together for at least a year. Earlier in the eighth chapter of Mark, Jesus has fed four thousand people with seven loaves of bread. Prior to this, Jesus feeds five thousand people with very little, heals the sick, casts out demons, and walks on the water to his disciples in a boat on the sea. In other words, the disciples have seen Jesus' greatest hits here in a short amount of time! They are learning more and more about each other and about Jesus. But I'd imagine, if I was one of the disciples, I might still be wondering, "Who is this man - really?"

Harry Adams writes: Jesus begins this moment in their life together by asking the disciples what they have heard people say about him. People obviously have been talking about him, because the disciples have something to report. Then Jesus moves to the critical question: "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answers. From what he has come to know of Jesus, heard Jesus say, he affirms, "You are the Messiah." Jesus seems to accept this title that Peter uses.

On the basis of our relationship with Jesus, on the basis of what we have come to know of him in the biblical witness and in the life of the Christian community, we make our own assessment and judgment about who he is. There are many titles or descriptions that we can use. We too can call him Christ or Messiah. We can call him Lord, Savior, Master, Friend, Teacher, Prophet, Son of God, Redeemer, Exemplar.

But then in this exchange with Peter and the other disciples, Jesus says a rather strange thing: "he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him" (v. 30). Why not? Why not tell others about him? (The subsequent conversation with Peter suggests at least one reason.) It comes clear that

when Peter calls him the Messiah, he may have the right title but the wrong understanding of what the title means for Jesus. When Jesus declares “quite openly” that he is going to suffer and be rejected and be killed, Peter does not want to hear that. One wonders if Peter even hears the last part of Jesus’ statement, the part about rising after three days. Peter does not want to hear about a suffering Messiah. He apparently is looking for a Messiah who will establish God’s rule with power and authority, and who will bring his followers glory and reward.

The experience of Peter serves as an alert for us . . . When we speak of Jesus and who he is for us, we need to do so with the humility and the reserve that comes from awareness that we may have the title right but may not fully understand its meaning. What does it mean for us if we call Jesus Savior? What does it mean for us if we call Jesus Son of God? What does it mean for us if we too call Jesus Messiah? (Harry Adams, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 70-72).

Just like the disciples and Peter, we may have one impression of who Jesus is for us, but that may not be the role Jesus needs to have in our lives at that moment. Or another way to look at it would be that God meets us in God’s Son in the form we most need for that particular time in our lives. We simply need to have a humble approach to our God and our Lord to be able to accept and embrace that Godly-presence when we most need it. And that begins with answering the question, “Who are you?”

Who are you? Are you a student struggling with knowing your place in life? Is your identity wrapped up in grades and extra-curriculars and who is following you on social media? Do you worry about other people’s opinions about you - “Who do people say that I am?” - and does your self-esteem rise and fall with those outside perceptions? How might your faith in Jesus impact the way you answer the question, “Who are you?”

Are you the rock of your family that everyone relies on and turns to in times of chaos and uncertainty? Is your identity wrapped up in doctor appointments and challenging conversations and trying to make whole those things and people who are broken? Do you worry about depleting your emotional reservoir, even as people look to you and say, “Wow - I don’t know how you handle it all.” How might your faith in Jesus impact the way you answer the question, “Who are you?”

Are you wandering in the wilderness of uncertainty, going through the motions of work and family, but underneath it all feeling lost? Is your identity wrapped up in the mundane aspects of life, but you find no meaning or happiness in those routines? Do you worry about letting down this façade which others see, afraid of what they might think if you were honest and transparent to what you were really feeling? How might your faith in Jesus impact the way you answer the question, “Who are you?”

I believe the gift of the Christian faith is that God meets us at different times in our lives with whatever we most need at that time. Sometimes it might be an encouraging word when our self-esteem is low, and Jesus comes

and meets us as a Friend. Sometimes it might be a comforting presence amid the weight of grief and loss, and Jesus comes as a consoler and meets us as a Healer. Sometimes it might be the sharp rebuke and slap in the face we need to get out of the selfish, narrow idea of faith that we have slipped into, and Jesus comes as a Teacher and Prophet. Indeed, isn't that what Jesus sounds like in the last portion of our passage today? "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" (8:34-35). God comes to us in human form so that we might know God most fully and abundantly - in whatever situation in life we find ourselves in.

Our task, our job, our role as Christ's disciples is to not put limits on God's role in our lives. We are to be humble and open to how God continues to shape and form us as God's children. We never know how God might speak to us - a word of encouragement from a mentor, a word of comfort from a stranger, a word of accountability from a co-worker - and in so doing, God is revealing Jesus' title and purpose to us all at once. When we answer the question, "Who are you?" we must not leave God out of the response - or else we might forever miss out on how God has come to us in human form to truly be our Teacher, our Master, our Savior, and our Friend.

Who are you? You are a beloved child of God, and life-long disciple of Jesus Christ. May you always and forever claim that title and purpose as you live out your vocation of love, service, and grace, knowing you are never alone as you walk this journey called life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.