

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Mark 8:27-28

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Psalms 116:1-8

James 3:1-12

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The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

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Has anyone ever asked you why you are a Christian? Have you ever been asked why you follow Jesus?

How do you answer those kinds of questions?

Talking about our faith is tricky territory. It isn't the most popular thing to do in the world we live in today. All too often religious belief has gotten co-opted for political gain and personal interests. To divide people into shallow, easy to understand groups that folks can recognize. One of them. One of those. One of us.

It's understandable that we may not know how to talk about faith or how to articulate why it's important. I have a feeling this is not so dissimilar to Jesus' day. Religion as a tool for power and social / political groupings is nothing new. And so it makes sense that in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is curious as to what people are saying about him.

He asks the disciples...what are people saying about me? The answers are broad. They are confusing. It's as though people aren't quite sure how to talk about the subject. I can imagine in the midst of the Roman Empire this wasn't the conversation that would secure your place in the system. It surely wouldn't guarantee your success or your social standing. Following an outlier was risky business. So folks seemed to stumble on their response.

Jesus then asks the disciples... Who do you say that I am?

In other words...can you describe to me how you might tell someone why it's important to follow my example.

Peter tries to answer...I just tell people you are the Messiah. He probably shrugged and crossed his fingers hoping this answer would suffice.

Jesus wasn't satisfied. And so, Jesus steps in and gives a more descriptive answer. And interestingly, it's not an answer that describes who he is. He doesn't even tell the disciples *why* they should follow him. His answer isn't a rationale of belief or unbelief. It's about an action. Jesus tells them *how* to follow. He gives them something to do, not something to say.

And, this isn't an answer Peter expects.

Peter doesn't want to hear about pain and suffering. It's too much, it's too hard. You can almost hear Peter saying...I know I was telling people you are the Messiah but I'm not sure I meant *that* kind of Messiah!

Because that kind of Messiah might offend someone. That kind of Messiah might not be very popular. That kind of Messiah is going to require more of me than I am willing to give. How am I supposed to talk about following Jesus when following Jesus doesn't fit into...One of them. One of those. One of us.

No, Jesus doesn't fit into "one of them" or "one of those" or even "one of us." Jesus wasn't trying to play the part of a political pundit or a successful CEO or a social media influencer. Jesus wasn't bringing attention to himself for his own popularity or for his own gain. In fact, I would argue that he wasn't trying to bring attention to himself at all. What he was trying to do was bring attention to a way for people to live. He was trying to do the difficult work of love and compassion and justice and peace.

He wasn't trying to tell someone who he was. He was showing people how to be.

It's the cross that represents not so much the question of who do you say that I am but what do you do when you follow me?

Because if you really proclaim who Jesus is, something within you surely changes. And when we claim who we are in the name of Jesus, our actions change. Our commitments change. We want to carry that cross in whatever way we can because claiming Jesus means claiming a changed life and a changed heart.

So if you are ever asked...why do you follow Jesus, your answer is found not in words but in the cross you carry.

As one of my favorite sayings goes...preach the Gospel at all times, and when necessary use words.

Your life is your answer. But, you have to live it. And people need to see it. They need to see Jesus not in places of power or popularity, but in places of our every day lives. In our need, in our hurt and in our pain, in our strength and in our courage. They need to see Jesus in mutual care and respect. They need to see Jesus in the hard work of reconciliation and peace building. They need to see Jesus in us. That is your answer.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.