

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

This is the third of twelve weeks of walking chronologically through the Gospel of Mark in our lectionary cycle this fall.

Today we hit the middle of Mark's Gospel – a pivot point – where Jesus predicts his suffering and resurrection for the first time (he will do it two more times in chapters 9 and 10). From here on out it's a slow progression both narratively and geographically toward Jerusalem.

Each of the three times Jesus predicts his suffering and resurrection in these chapters, a distinct pattern is followed, where Jesus makes his prediction, the disciples misinterpret and clumsily respond, and Jesus offers a teaching on what it really means to be his disciple.¹

Today Peter is the clumsy one. After a promising start to answering the question, "*But who do you say I am?*" with a spot on, "*You are the Messiah,*" he then turns to rebuke Jesus when Jesus explains what it means to **be** the Messiah. The discipleship teaching then, is to take up your cross and follow Jesus, and the necessity of giving up one's life in order to save it.

This is the interaction that usually grabs my attention, there's so much good stuff there to explore, and in looking back it's what I've preached on every other time this passage has come up in the lectionary.

¹ Salt* Lectionary Commentary for the Seventeenth Week after Pentecost, www.saltproject.org.

But this week I kept coming back to those questions at the start:

Who do people say that I am?

But who do you say I am?

These are not abstract questions from millennia ago, these are questions that continue to play out today.

They are a real part of many of the pastoral conversations I have with people, often unpacking the damaging ways people in their past have presented who God is.

They should (and yes, I am using should here even though I usually say “don’t should all over yourself”) – but they should be a part of our prayer life, a centering piece of our relationship with God, asking again and again: who is God to me, and how do I live differently because of that?

These questions are also a part of what we see in pop culture and how Christianity is presented. And they are a part of how religion is portrayed in the news and in our social media feeds.

My observation is that in those circles, the loudest voice is usually the one that gets picked up, **not** the one that most closely resembles Christ himself. That seems par for the course, as even in this story it is Peter’s loud rebuke that we often focus on – not Jesus’ own claims about himself:

His prediction that his power was not like the power of human empires – and was in fact at odds with human power, and would lead to his suffering and death.

His role not as a king to lord it over people and command their allegiance – but as a deliverer who means to save us from our self-centered obsession with our own deliverance, and taught that love and generosity and compassion are what make the world go ‘round.’²

Those questions - *Who do people say that I am? But who do you say I am?* – those are questions to gauge if we’re paying attention to what Jesus has **said** and **done** – to see if we’re listening to **him** or to all the voices that just talk **about** him.

Because there are a lot of voices out there (yes, mine included). And those voices can pull you in lots of different directions: into deeper relationship with God, but also away from the heart of God.

It is as our reading from the Letter of James says today: the tongue has power to curse and to bless, to set our course like the rudder on a ship – so are we brackish water or fresh in our speech? What water are we feeding our lives with when we listen to others?

That is, I believe, one measure for all the voices who would tell us who God is. Do their words bring life or death – love or apathy?

Another is summed up poignantly this way by author Ann Lamott: “You can safely assume you’ve created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.”³

Because unfortunately, both historically and today, this often how people tell us who God is – by proclaiming who they think exists outside of God’s love.

² Salt* Lectionary Commentary for the Seventeenth Week after Pentecost, www.saltproject.org.

³ Ann Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*

But as our Gospel from last week reminds us, there is **no one** outside the circle of God's love. And so I have been carrying with me all week this line from a reflection written by a Methodist pastor: **Jesus has a million questions, and most of them are the same one: "Do you know how much I love you?"**⁴

Do you know how much I love you? – Enough to heal you.

Do you know how much I love you? – Enough to teach you.

Do you know how much I love you? – Enough to face the cross for you.

Do you know how much I love you? – Enough to leave the tomb empty for you.

Do you know how much I love you? – Enough to be with you always.

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It is because of all this that we are here today – and we have homework. This week I am asking you to take some time to pray and think about these questions: *But who do you say I am? Do you know how much I love you?*

Then write your thoughts down. Maybe they go in the journal you already keep, or are the first entry in a new gratitude diary. Maybe it's just a slip of paper that you tuck into a drawer or put in your wallet. Whatever works for you.

But do this – because being a disciple of Christ is more than showing up on Sundays, it is how we live our lives, and that begins by knowing the one leading us to eternal life.

~ AMEN ~

⁴ Steve Garnaas-Holmes, www.unfoldinglight.net