

## **“... called by Jesus...”**

*A sermon preached on Mark 8:27-38 by Emily Hull McGee  
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on September 16, 2018*

### I.

The Episcopal priest and author Fleming Rutledge once described waiting at a jewelry counter behind a woman who was shopping for a cross necklace. The clerk pulled out a case and sat it on the counter and asked, “Now do you want a plain one? Or do you want one with the little man on it?”<sup>1</sup>

Quite a question about the cross, right?

### II.

Last week, we began a month-long sermon series interpreting our newly-adopted vision statement in light of the gospel passages in the lectionary. You remember our vision statement: *We are a community in the heart of the city called by Jesus to practice bold love of God and neighbor and boundless compassion for all people.* Today as we focus on that phrase ‘called by Jesus,’ we enter into some cross-talk and conversation about the one upon it, as we meet Jesus and his disciples in the Gospel of Mark.

Biblical scholars of all stripes are practically unanimous in their agreement that this passage we heard Justin read for us is a turning point in Mark. From verse one of this earliest of the four gospels, we hear the identification that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed and chosen Son of God. But despite all that he does in the time preceding this passage,

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<sup>1</sup> Illustration shared from dear friend Rev. Alan Sherouse.

this particular designation of Jesus as Messiah isn't claimed again by any person he encounters until now.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus and his disciples are on the road to Caesarea Philippi, our text tells us, traveling north from the Sea of Galilee into a series of villages nestled there into the base of Mount Hermon. They were presumably on a missionary tour to the Jews who lived nearby, but let's not miss the significance of the location, fully informed by its Roman occupants. Caesarea Philippi was so named by the ruler Herod the Great, in honor of the ruler Philip, marked by a huge temple there dedicated to the ruler Caesar Augustus. So we can imagine that people in Caesarea Philippi probably had a clear picture of what leadership looked like. Into such a setting, Jesus then asks his disciples about what they were hearing. "Who do people say that I am?," Jesus asked. "We've been traveling around together for some time now, so what are people saying?" The disciples' answers were similar: "John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets." Each a figure of prophetic imagination, all who were forerunners of the long-foretold Messiah, but not those who bore its name.

Together, the setting and the scuttlebutt present a picture of a Messiah — the chosen, appointed, anointed one long-promised to the people of Israel as the one kingly ruler who would come to deliver them, lead them to restoration, bring order and peace for this people who had long been oppressed by those bearing names like Herod, Caesar Augustus, and Philip.<sup>3</sup> But according to the word on the street, the people didn't think Jesus actually

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<sup>2</sup> Helpful exegetical work this week and throughout Section 2 of the sermon come from three primary sources: V. Bruce Rigdon and Jeffery Siker's commentaries on "Mark 8:27-30," *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, pp.236-241; and Douglas R. A. Hare, *Mark*, Westminster Bible Companion, p97-110.

<sup>3</sup> Information gleaned from the brilliant Dr. Diane Lipsett, via notes from her New Testament Interpretation class at Wake Forest University School of Divinity, September 10, 2007.

**was** the Messiah; rather, like the prophets John the Baptist, Elijah, and others, Jesus was merely announcing that the Messiah was coming.

No wonder he drew such crowds! For if the Messiah is coming, there is hope for the hopeless, healing for the sick, liberation for the prisoner, relief for the poor, and recovery for the addicted. If the Messiah is coming, soon we'll be back on top, *our* way will be *the* way, and all who have oppressed us will be rightly put in their place. Surely such a Messiah will look like a king, a leader, a strong and mighty one who will usher in an era of peace and prosperity. For *that* Messiah is coming!

But then Jesus's question to the disciples turns from "what have you heard," to "what about you?" For the disciples have seen new life sparkling in the eyes of those he's healed and set free. They've passed around the bread he's miraculously found and shared. They've heard the grumbling of his Jewish opposition, those whose role he thoroughly threatened. Jesus didn't ask them 'what do you think I'm doing?,' or 'how does this all work?,' or even 'why are you here?' No, he cuts right to the chase, right past all the expectations and assumptions to the heart of the matter — Who am I to you? *Who do **you** say that I am?*

### III.

"Who do you say that I am?," Jesus asks us still today.

"Who do you say that I am?," he asks to we who are sick, and we who are hungry. "Who do you say that I am?," he asks to we who are stricken with grief, and we who are driven by greed. "Who do you say that I am?," he asks to we who are occupied, and we who are held captive. "Who do you say that I am?," he asks to we ache to be right, and we who need to be needed. "Who do

you say that I am?," he asks to we who are filled with anger, and we who prefer to fade into the noise. "Who do you say that I am?," he asks to we who are racked with fear, and we who convince ourselves that we can do it all. "Who do you say that I am?," he asks to we who long for One to come and set things right. "Who do you say that I am?," he asks to we the church, this community in the heart of the city called First Baptist Church on Fifth.

It's a question that is devastatingly personal, because it assumes some sense of a relationship, right? For if Jesus was but an artifact of human history — a thing to analyze, an event to explain, an object to study — then we could imagine him more readily asking, "what do you think about me?" Or "how do you envision 'following me' to work?"

But God did not call 'anointed' any one particular item or thing to acquire, no matter how great. God did not call 'chosen' any certain moment or experience, no matter how transformative. God did not call 'appointed' any one way of thinking or worldview, no matter how liberating or filled with truth. No — God has claimed that the 'Messiah' — the chosen, appointed, anointed one — was and is and will be the flesh-and-blood person Jesus of Nazareth in whom we have life! This cross is not plain, it is one with a little man on it!

Peter seemed to grasp that, for his words are the proclamation and the turn upon which the rest of the gospel unfolds: "You are the Messiah!"

Did Peter understand that this Messiah wasn't going to be like any other king or ruler or leader they had ever known? Did he connect the dots between the young children coming to Jesus and the hemorrhaging woman and the hungry crowds and the blind beggars and the mustard seeds and the

hopeful ones newly set free and the storms he calmed with a word? Could he have imagined that the long-awaited Messiah would be ... him?

“You are the Messiah!” he claimed, but instantly Jesus would dismantle his expectations. For there would be suffering and rejection, death and resurrection, denying oneself and taking up one’s cross to follow, losing lives in order to save them. I have to wonder if Peter then thought to himself: *Who have I said that he is? And what is he calling me to do?*

#### IV.

Moments ago, we heard from Bryanna and Hailey Greene, our newest sisters in Christ and members of the body bear witness to Jesus, telling us what he means for their lives and claiming boldly before God and this gathered community that “Jesus is Lord.” By saying “Jesus is Lord,” they’re saying that Jesus has become their primary guide and governor, that no thing, no idea, and most importantly, no **one** holds the power to set them free as Jesus does. For these two have been called by Jesus!

I remember significant times when I too have been called by Jesus. There was the first call, when conversations with my parents and adolescent prayers to God led me to stand in similar waters at the age of seven, robed in white and certain of a few simple truths – that God loved me, that Jesus came to save me and abide with me forever, and that through its faithful gathering, my church offered a way of living the Christian life together. There were the steady calls throughout my teenage years that taught me ways to be a follower – how to read scripture, how to pray, how to worship, how to make moral decisions informed by my relationship with God, how to let myself be inhabited by the Spirit. There were the calls that resounded even in

the wildernesses of my own making – calls that awakened me to those on the margins, calls that invited me into a deeper and more layered reading of scripture and Christian tradition, calls that reminded me of the presence of Jesus in my life in the seasons when even his name felt foreign or co-opted by Christians I no longer recognized. Then there was the call again to surrender – not my life eternal, but my life as I was designing it and dreaming it to be. For this call would be the one that took me to divinity school and set me on a path to vocational ministry, a call that allowed me to reclaim faith as my own, to find in Jesus’s words and deeds a particular bent towards justice and liberation, to orient my understanding of Christianity towards God’s kingdom dream for this world, and to imagine the ways in which he might use me – a very imperfect-yet-hopeful messenger – to participate within.

But in my experience, Jesus’s calls aren’t always big and dramatic like the ones I’ve just described. Daily I’ve heard his calls to certain communities and relationships, calls to speak and to listen, calls to change and calls to remain, calls to lead and calls to follow. But most of all, I hear time and time again the call that shapes me, refines me, frustrates me, and gives me life – the call to be a disciple of Jesus and live as though he and only he is Lord.

God only knows how many days there are when I’d rather just handle this life myself, thank you very much. Days when I’m convinced that it’s through my own productivity or control or efforts that make things possible, when I’m certain that any failure I meet comes because I just didn’t *do* quite enough, or at least that I didn’t do things boldly, quickly, broadly, effectively, creatively enough. And somehow through the noise of my mind and the

clamor of all that claws at me, I hear a voice rise above the din and ask:  
“Emily, who do you say that I am?”

I answer that call when I loosen my grip on all I think I can do or manage, denying my tendencies to save myself through whatever accomplishments I can rustle up. For it's when I lose these wants and desires that I take up the cross of Christ. It's when I lose this life I try far too often to control that I experience my life to be saved again and again and again. It's when I answer with Peter *and mean it* that Jesus really does become my Messiah, my Lord, and the one who by the power at work within me is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all I could ask or imagine.

Mine is just one of the millions of stories of people like you and me and those all around the world in all time and place who have been saved and transformed by this Messiah, Jesus Christ our Lord. So brothers and sisters, Jesus is calling us today and everyday with a question: ‘who do you say that I am?’ That question is one he asks each and every one of us to consider, for our answer demands something from us.

Perhaps Jesus's call to ‘deny yourselves’ can be understood instead as an invitation to consciously set aside our deepest ache, our most profound need, our underlying motivation for so many of our decisions and perspectives. Instead of suggesting that those who remain oppressed should stay that way or that restraint from any of life's pleasures just for the sake of restraint is preferred, what if ‘denying ourselves’ meant denying our deepest wants? What if ‘denying ourselves’ meant setting aside our desire to be right, or our need to be needed, or our drive for success, or our hunger to be unique, or our longing for privacy, or our ever-present fear, or our constant

yearning for the next thing, or our demand for strength, or our perpetual avoidance of conflict?<sup>4</sup>

And for our church, what if 'denying ourselves' meant joining as redeemed individuals by God's unfettered grace to always, always be sure that our dream for First Baptist is in line with God's dream? What if 'denying ourselves' meant setting aside whatever particular desires and wants we individually hold so that our **first** and most profound need is to take up the cross of Christ and follow Jesus in the way of life abundant?

This way will not be without loss or difficulty, for us as individuals or as a church, but it will be the way of Christ, the way of hope, peace, joy, and love, the way of life abundant ... if only we are to answer such a call.

Who do you say that I am?

You are the Messiah!

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> If you're a student of the Enneagram, you likely recognize the core needs of each of the nine types in this point here. That was intentional! For more information in a straightforward, easy to read and understand way, see [enneagramworldwide.com](http://enneagramworldwide.com).