



Hear the Word

from Pastor Shelley Bryan Wee

Gather... Encourage... Equip... Send...

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

September 16, 2018

Mark 8:27-38

There is an old joke that goes like this: Jesus was walking around one day and saw an old man crying. So Jesus approached him and asked, "My old man, what's wrong? You look sorrowful and downhearted." The man said, "Yes, I am sorrowful. I had this son and now he's gone."

Jesus replied, "Oh, well, I've traveled many places and met many people. Why don't you describe your son to me. It's possible I've seen him somewhere." The man said, "Well, he was kind and loving, and everyone seemed to have been fond of him. But I heard he died trying to save some lives. He had holes in his hands and feet. But most importantly, he was supposed to take over my woodworking business." Jesus looked at the man and said, "Dad?" The man looked at Jesus and said, "Pinocchio?"

Sorry. Not a great beginning ... I apologize ...

In this morning's gospel, we hear Jesus asking his disciples about who he is. He seems to be wondering if there's been a case of mistaken identity – perhaps not to the extent of being called Pinocchio, but in any case, some people seem to have mistaken who he is.

Now, he and his disciples have just come into the district of Caesarea Philippi with a whole bunch of miracles behind them. As you recall from previous Sundays the miracles include the feeding of the five thousand, the calming of the sea, the walking on water, the curing of the Canaanite woman's daughter among many, many others. But Jesus has not just been healing and miracle-making; he's been teaching as well.

Every now and then he quizzes his disciples to see how much they are taking in, to see how well they have understood him, and the disciples don't seem to be making much progress. In the verses just before the ones we read today, Jesus warns the disciples to be on guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Eager to please, the disciples put their literal, fishermen's heads together and they decide that Jesus is talking about bread. "We brought no bread," one of them says, and Jesus explodes. "Oh men of little faith," he says, "Why do you discuss among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? ... How is it that you didn't get that I was not speaking about bread?"

Small wonder, then, that these disciples are a little anxious when Jesus gathers them all around and asks an entirely different kind of question – not one about anything he has said, but one about who he is. "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples are relieved. They know the answer to this one. After all, it's not their answer; they can use other people's answers. "John the Baptist," one of them says. "Elijah" offers another. "One of the prophets," says still another.

You can almost see the expectation on the disciples' faces as they give these answers. So which is it, Lord? What is the right answer? A, B, C, or none of the above? There's no risk at Jesus telling them they are wrong. After all, these answers came from others. But Jesus does not tell them the right answer. Instead he turns the question back on them. "Ah," he says, "Now that you have told me what others believe, you tell me what you believe. Who do you say that I am?"

You can feel the heat going up the disciples' necks. You can feel their eyes turn away. Some of the disciples scuffle their feet. Others scoot back so that Jesus won't call on them. Who knows how long that silence stretched out until Peter broke in with his answer, "*You are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God!*"

Thank goodness for Peter! Right or wrong, he is always the first one out of the gate, the first one of them to leave his fish net and follow Jesus, the first one, the only one, out of the boat to walk on water, the first to volunteer his opinion on any given subject. Sometimes it's hard to say whether he is courageous or just plain reckless.

But finally, smack dab in the middle of the gospel of Mark – eight chapters in, eight chapters to go – Peter gets it. Or at least he seems to get it when finally, he makes his declaration ... But let's be honest, he really doesn't get it ... And Jesus calls him on it.

And this is where the story gets really weird. Because instead of praising Peter, instead of saying, "Yes! You are my number one disciple now and always!" Instead of saying that, Jesus tells Peter to keep his mouth shut and then he immediately launches into a grim description of what will happen to him in Jerusalem. Jesus says, *the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.*"

Jesus paints a picture so bleak, so upsetting, and so opposite of what Peter and the rest of the disciples were thinking, Peter pulls him aside and tells him to knock it off. And then Jesus turns on Peter and tells him to knock it off! What's more, he does so using words that shock us still, two thousand years later: "*Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*"

What I love about this exchange – besides that Peter and Jesus are such good friends that they can call each other Satan and remain friends – what I love about Peter's confession of faith – "You are the Messiah" – what I love is that it isn't the end of Peter's searching and growing and journeying with Jesus and learning about Jesus. This isn't the culmination of Peter's thought process. This is about being in the middle of things. This is about learning and being and growing in a relationship – this is about knowing that you just don't know.

As soon as Peter thinks he has the answer to the question nailed down, Jesus shuts him up, challenges what he knows, and nudges him back into the journey. Jesus responds, "*Yes, I am the Messiah. No, you have no idea what "Messiah" means. In fact, you're not even ready to know what "Messiah" means; you can barely tolerate my talking about it. There's so much more for you to learn, Peter. So many more answers for you to grow into. Be patient. Don't force it. Try to love what is unsolved. Keep living into the question.*"

When I think about the whole of Peter's story – all the biographical details that we who have the Bible in hand can know and ponder – I'm stunned by the answers that Peter must have lived into as time went on.

At the end of Peter's life, as he looked back at what he experienced, maybe this question of Jesus continued to haunt him – but now Peter realizes, "*Oh yes! You're the one who said "Yes, come walk on the water with me." You're the one who caught me before I drowned. Oh yes! You're the one who washed my feet while I squirmed in shame. Oh yes! You're the one who told me – accurately – that I'd be a coward on the very night you needed me to be brave. Oh yes, you're the one I denied to save my own skin. And yes, you're the one who looked into my eyes when the cock crowed. Oh yes! You're the one who found me on the beach and spoke love and fresh purpose into my humiliation. Oh yes! You're the one who taught me that the kingdom of God*

is so much bigger than I thought. Oh yes! I get it now. You are the Messiah. More than that, you are my Messiah. And I am yours."

But Peter couldn't say that in the middle of the story – he just didn't know. He couldn't know. His story was still going.

Who do *you* say that Jesus is? It's a question to ponder for a lifetime. It's an ongoing question for all of us. I ask you, how is this question lived out in your life? How is this question lived out in the life and ministry of Saint Andrew's?

There are a lot of questions here right now, right?

- What does it mean to be a church when most people around here don't go to church?
- What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus when there are Christians who make hateful remarks about other people of God in the name of Jesus?
- What does it mean to honestly and humbly ask people outside of these walls how who Jesus is? And listen to their answers respectfully and wholly.
- What will it mean for you and for Saint Andrew's when Pastor McEachran leaves after 34 years? What is God calling Saint Andrew's to be? What remains the same? What changes?

Who do you say that Jesus is? Who are you as you wrestle with this question?

As I've said, this encounter happens at the very center of Mark's story of Jesus. After this story, Jesus stops wandering around Galilee and Samaria and all those other places. Instead he begins marching towards Jerusalem – to the cross – to his death and resurrection. On the way, he continues to show Peter and the disciples and the crowds what it means to be the Messiah, what it means to follow the Messiah – really what it means to live into the question that Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?"

We are in the middle of the story, too. We are journeying with Jesus, too. We can't answer all the questions. And that sometimes feels scary and incomplete.

But know this, as you live into the questions, as you and I and all of us accept that we can't know what we don't know, we do know this: Jesus journeys with us. And even now Jesus is showing us what it means to follow the Messiah. What it means to be our Messiah.

May we live into the mystery, while at the same time, trusting the first words of the gospel of Mark. The very first words that state, "This is the story of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." This story of Jesus that includes Peter and the disciples. This story of Jesus that includes, continues – past the words in scripture – into our stories. Our stories where every day God is revealed through Jesus. The Messiah for you and for the world.

Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am?" ... And we respond as best we can, "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Holy One of God." Trusting, knowing, wondering, journeying. Living into the question. Amen.