

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 09/12/2021



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, September 12th

Mark 8:27-38

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But who do you say that I am?

Jesus has come to a pivotal moment in His mission to the world. His ministry to the Jews resulted in Him all but being run out of Galilee. Jesus is now in Gentile territory on His way to Jerusalem and His appointment with the cross. He has precious short time to make an impact on a few disciples that will continue His ministry after His death. How much of an impact has He had with them? They have seen everything Jesus did with the crowds but what do they understand about Him. Jesus asks them a question that every disciple of Christ should ask – But who do you say that I am? After dealing with the response, Jesus then begins to teach His disciples about the true meaning of Messiahship and discipleship.

Mark 8:27-38 Commentary

The two-stage healing of the blindman at Bethsaida occurs immediately before this week's lectionary text (8:22-26). Later, as Jesus approaches Jericho and His last stop before Jerusalem, there is another blind healing, this time it is blind Bartimaeus (10:46-52). It is against the context of two bookends of blind healings that vv. 8:27-10:45 should be understood. This involves Jesus' journey to Caesarea Philippi and ultimately to Jerusalem (11:1) and is characterized by Jesus' intense instruction of His disciples rather than the healings and miracles seen earlier. Jesus is addressing the spiritual blindness of His disciples.

²⁷ And Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. And on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

The setting for these events is crucial. The city of Caesarea Philippi was about 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee outside of the reach of Herod Antipas. The population was mostly Gentiles. The area was scattered with numerous temples to Baal. Near the town at the base of the mountain rising upwards to the heavens was a deep cavern that had connections to Pan, the Greek god of nature – the one with the hindquarters and horns of a goat. This cave was also the original source of the River Jordan and thus deeply significant for the Jews. At the entrance of this cave, there stood a white marble temple built by Herod the Great dedicated to Caesar. His son, Philip the tetrarch over this region, changed the name of this town to Caesarea and added his own name.

Barclay points out the dramatic nature of this picture. Here is a homeless, penniless Galilean carpenter with a small band of ordinary people. They are here because the orthodox are plotting to kill Jesus as a dangerous heretic. Here they stand in an area littered with temples to Syrian Gods at a place of Pan worship in the shadow of

the white-marble splendor of a temple dedicated to Caesar-worship at the source of the River Jordan. It is on the road to Caesarea Philippi that Jesus chooses to ask his disciples who do they think he is.¹

²⁸ And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets." ²⁹ And he asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Christ." ³⁰ And he strictly charged them to tell no one about him.

The disciples respond to Jesus' question by giving third party opinions which the question requested. Jesus then asks His disciples a much more personal question: "But who do you say that I am?" It is only Peter who responds who identifies Jesus as the Christ (the Messiah – the Anointed one of God). Mark makes no mention of how such a confession could only have been the result of illumination by the Holy Spirit (cf. Matthew 16:17). The reason for the Messianic secret is obvious in the following section. Even Peter does not understand the true nature of the Messiah.

³¹ And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² And he said this plainly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and seeing his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man."

This the first time Jesus reveals to the twelve the meaning of Messiahship. The other two occasions are 9:31 and 10:33. With each occasion a fuller picture of the nature of Messiahship and the cost of discipleship are revealed. Having just confessed Jesus as the Messiah, Peter rebukes Jesus when His explanation of Messiahship does not align with Peter's worldly expectations. Perhaps Peter here is the blind man in Bethsaida in the two-stage healing. Peter is seeing but not seeing clearly. Jesus faced temptation directly from Satan in the wilderness. Now Satan appears in the voice of a friend.

³⁴ And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. ³⁶ For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? ³⁷ For what can a man give in return for his soul? ³⁸ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

Jesus now addresses the His disciples as well as the crowd. Jesus presents the cost of discipleship. There are no easy promises here. Everything that Jesus expects of His disciples is something that He has faced Himself. "Deny himself" is literally *say no to himself*. In other words, the words "self-<insert word here>" should never apply to a disciple. This is rather a strange calling in a world that worships the self. We must say yes to Jesus and follow Jesus wherever it may lead in this life. A disciple must follow the will of Christ not his or her own will. This is the only way to freedom. Freedom to follow the self ends up in brokenness and bondage.

The Greek word *psychē* used in 35-37 is rendered as both *life* and *soul*. Life is thus like a wealth. It is only of value when it is invested. One who lives in fear of losing life ends up wasting potential of the gift we have all been given. In trying to save our life we lose it. By giving away our life for the sake of the Gospel we gain life.

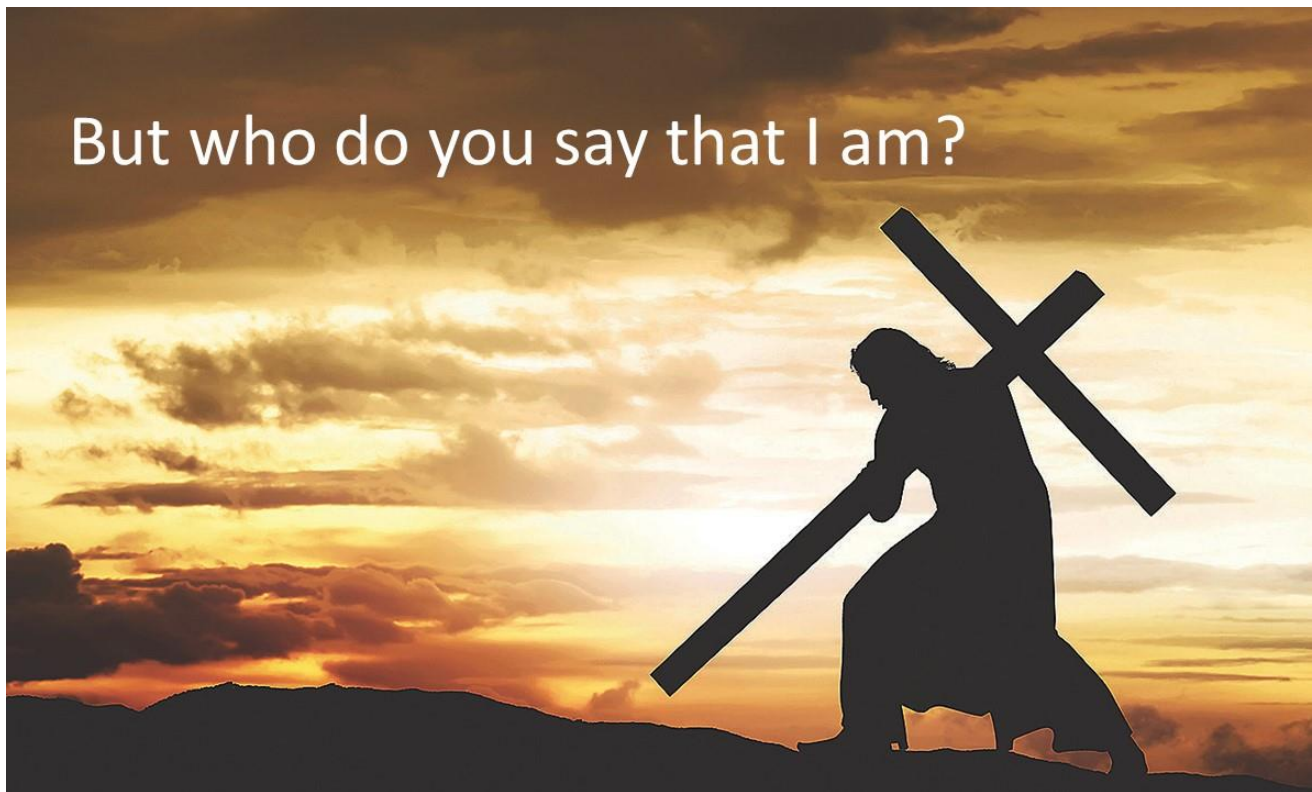
¹ William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 155-158.

Reflections

The question Jesus posed to His disciples at this most pivotal time and place in His ministry is also one of great significance for Christianity in the West today. Who do people say Jesus is today? This question would certainly liven up a Bible study or small group meeting, particularly if written responses are requested. There are many different Jesuses in our culture: A great moral teacher, a friend to those in need, a life coach, a means to worldly health and prosperity, a social justice warrior, one of many expressions of God in a religiously pluralistic society, and so on. There are many who publicly confess Jesus as the Christ using the words of an ancient creed on Sundays yet worship some idol during the rest of the week. In a culture that worships the self, it is perhaps not surprising many have defined Jesus in the way they want Him to be. For every consumer need, there is a Jesus.

As the text illustrates, the most important question is not the general but the personal. The question Jesus posed to His disciples is one that each of us needs to answer: *But who do you say that I am*. When we answer this question, we must then ask ourselves an uncomfortable question of our own – Do I live my life like I believe this answer?

Nobody can accuse Jesus of trying to lure people to follow Him by promises of an easy life or worldly popularity. Yet that is what many churches today attempt to do by substituting easy-believism for true repentance, church membership for discipleship, new member orientation for Christian formation, and the list goes on – a sanitized and socialized view of discipleship without the radicalness. That sort of thing is bad for worldly respectability. Perhaps the location for this question today should be Madison Ave, New York.



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