

Sermon - Who are you? Mark 9:38-50

Who are you? Really. Take a moment to ponder that question...and then ask yourself how you came to that answer. Do you, that is, define yourself by your accomplishments, or your history, or particularly critical experiences, or your relationships, or some combination of the above?

Another way to get at this question might be to ask, who gets to tell you who you are? Who, that is, has the most influence in shaping your self-image? Is it your parents, your partner or spouse, your friends and colleagues? Or perhaps it's the world of advertising, which constantly tries to overwhelm us with ads picturing perfect people leading perfect lives all designed to tell us who we are, or at least who we should be. Or maybe it's the news media, eager to make you anxious with a constant barrage of worrisome headlines.

I ask these questions because I think this passage is very much about identity.

Though perhaps not at first glance. At first glance the passage appears to be about Jesus admonishing his disciples to lighten up, to stop worrying about others who are following him (but not, apparently, to the disciples' satisfaction) and instead focus on what matters or, perhaps even more, on avoiding those things that can cause one to stumble and stray from the narrow road.

Scholars tell us that this particular section reflects some conflicts between early Christian communities. Mark is framing this part of his narrative, in other words, to address some of the problems his folks are having with other Christians. Apparently the early Christian church wasn't all united in their beliefs, sometimes clashed with each other, and occasionally even berated one another over differences in practice. (Hmmm, sounds familiar?) In other words, Mark was trying to help his congregation answer the question of who they are. Will they, he asks, define themselves over and against other Christians or will they discover their identity in their attempt to follow Jesus, to care for the

vulnerable, and to avoid those things that are destructive to self, neighbor, and community.

Which brings me back to the question of identity and, in particular, how seductive it is to try to determine who we are on the backs of our neighbors. Note the tone and tenor struck by the disciples' statement: "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." More complaint than observation, and perhaps even more accusation than complaint, the disciples want Jesus to affirm their judgment and action against this other follower because he was not playing by their rules or following their lead.

The disciples, in other words, have decided who they are and defined themselves over and against this other person. They are the leaders of the fledgling Jesus movement, more important than others doing works in Jesus name, the inner circle who should be obeyed by lesser disciples. What's striking, of course, is that all this happens almost immediately after Jesus chided their earlier arguments about which of them was the greatest. It seems that all Jesus' admonishment did was to encourage them to give up vying amongst themselves so that they could vie together against everyone else!

Which is probably because this identity question can be really, really hard to answer. We don't come into this world knowing who we are, where we've come from, or where we're going.

In this time of uncertainty, we are often tempted to take matters into our own hands and address the question of identity on our own. Certainly there's plenty of encouragement from the culture to do just that. We are encouraged relentlessly to define ourselves through our accomplishments or, even more often, through our possessions. The moment you venture down this road, however, you're doomed to a sense of scarcity where there is never "enough" – accomplishments, honor, possessions, money, youth, whatever commodity you've decided is your measure – and each and every other person around you therefore

becomes a competitor. And before long you're trying to tell other people what to do and judging them for not conforming to your expectations.

When Jesus sees this happen with his disciples, he responds by inviting them, as we saw last week, to entertain the peculiar logic of God's kingdom where the weak and vulnerable are to be honored and where glory comes through service. This is the way of the cross. This week, he reiterates his counsel that mercy and love are the vehicles through which we discover and express our identity. And one of the great things about service, love, and mercy is that you never run out of them. There is no scarcity of opportunity to care for others, no lack of occasions to love your neighbor.

Allow another pop culture reference or two. At the turning point in the fifth season of *The Walking Dead*, one of the groups that intends great harm to the main characters explains their actions by saying that they learned the hard way that there are two kinds of people in the world, sheep and wolves. And after much suffering of their own, they'd decided never to be sheep again and play the part of wolves instead. This is the scarcity worldview and the negative identity to which the disciples (and we!) too easily fall prey. There is a similar image employed by Chris Kyle's dad in *American Sniper*, when he tells his sons that there are three kinds of people in the world, sheep, wolves, and sheep dogs, those called to protect the vulnerable, before admonishing them to remember that they are sheep dogs. This is a whole different point of view, one that opens up possibilities for unlimited service.

So I'll ask again, who are you? And, who influences how you see yourself?

Christians have from the beginning of our story struggled with this question, so it is not surprising that we struggle with it still. Identity isn't something you can attain, but only receive as a gift. And one of the primary reasons Jesus came was to tell us that we are beloved, holy, precious, and honored in God's eye so

that we might also hear ourselves called to lives of love, mercy, compassion, and service. The cross, in other words, was not the vehicle by which Jesus made it possible for God to love us, but rather was God's message through Jesus that we were and are loved all along.

Thanks be to God for his never-failing love. Amen.