**September 16, 2018**

**Mark 8:27-38; Proverbs 1:20-33**

Despite my best attempts to stay informed, I am the worst person to consult about trends and pop culture. After watching my first episode of the tv show *Parks and Rec* recently, I told Adam, “this is really funny!” He looked and me and shook his head and said, “I know. Everybody knows.” (The series finale was three years ago.) So if you ask me who Kim Kardashian is, and why she is famous, I can only broadly say that she is part of a celebrity family. I don’t understand exactly who she is or what she does that is so great. If you want to know who a Kardashian is, you should ask an expert. Someone who works for *People Magazine*, or who follows her on Twitter or Instagram.

I would say the same thing about professional football players. I don’t know their names or faces. If you want an accurate picture of Eli Manning or Jonathan Stewart, don’t ask me. You should ask an elementary kid who loves the New York Giants, or a sports writer, or a committed fan.

When Jesus asks the disciples, “who do *people* say that I am?” he was crowd sourcing the buzz. What was the talk around town? It seemed that everyone thought that he was kind of a big deal. They thought that he must have been a reincarnated Elijah or one of the prophets, or even John the Baptist (who was recently executed). People clearly thought that he was knowledgeable and provocative. People knew that he was someone to watch. A game-changer. Insert Jesus’ thoughtful pause here. “Hmm!”

It’s always interesting to know what people think of you. Try “Googling” yourself. You’ll see who and what people say you are. Of course, when I “Google” myself, a few thousand webpages appear with references to me. But that’s nothing! Googling a politician or a celebrity will bring thousands of references. And most of those folks are people who are not known by everybody. If you take it to the next level and Google the Pope, you will find 100 million webpages, or the Dalai Lama (38 million webpages) or Jesus Christ (almost 800 million webpages). Whether people know *much* about them or not, people have something to say about them.

Everyone has an opinion to share. The bishop in the cathedral, the person who cuts your hair, the outspoken blogger, the radio announcer you hear at rush hour. Ask anyone about Jesus, whether or not they *know* him – they have something to say about him. He is Mary’s son. He is a carpenter. He is a miracle worker. He is a teacher, a healer, a rebel, a helper. People say all sorts of things about Jesus in every possible context. People who don’t even like him use his name when they are at a loss for other words. “Jesus Christ!” I hear barreling out of an angry parent. (And I smile because I believe that this becomes a prayer and that Jesus does indeed hear and respond.) Everyone has an opinion about Jesus.

But nevermind about who *other* people say that Jesus is, Jesus isn’t really concerned about them. After a thoughtful pause, he pushed back against Peter. Who cares what *people* say about me – who do **you** say that I am?

That is the question for the church. Who do we say that Jesus is? Who do **you** say that Jesus is? What do you say and who do you tell?

This is part of our Christian Education. As we grow, we learn who *our church* has said that Jesus is, then we have the opportunity to decide for ourselves who Jesus is. The first people who teach us about Jesus – Sunday School teachers, youth leaders, pastors, and good neighbors – they usually tell us *nice* stories about Jesus. Friendly, easy to manage stories about Jesus. They use small words and friendly pictures. They lure us in with the pastoral pictures. They say that Jesus loves the little children. They say that Jesus also loves us. Then they complicate the picture by saying that Jesus loves us so much that he even died for us. They tell us that God made the world in 7 days?! Impossible. They say that God turned a river to blood, called some people God’s *chosen* people, and is supposed to come back to earth any day. People *say* all sorts of things that we initially accept.

Once we arrive at an age of reason, however, most of us question the stories we’ve been told. We wonder if God so loved the world, why do some people suffer from hunger or cancer or depression? We wonder exactly which Gospel is correct. We wonder exactly how Jesus saves us, and if it’s important that we get it right. We take all the stories apart, and spend the rest of our lives putting it back together (though it never goes back in the box as neatly as it was given to us). The Confirmation process is the official time when we ask teenagers to share what they’ve heard *people* say about Jesus, then we ask them stand up and share who *they* say Jesus is.

Our precious students then grow up to attend college or visit a friend’s church elsewhere or hear someone on tv say something completely different from what everyone else had told you about Jesus, then they have another opportunity to weigh what *people* say against what *they* say about Jesus. Many of us probably encounter some difference or challenge or reason to reflect on our personal faith on a regular basis. It’s a good thing. I would even go so far as to say that it’s a blessing. These encounters and questions push us to dig deeply into exactly what we believe.

So who *do* you say that Jesus is?

Presbyterian ministers are required to write statements of faith. As such, I continually update what exactly it is that I believe. On any other day, I would be glad to share mine with you, but for today, the challenge Jesus extends is not for people to say what everyone else believes, but for each person, each disciple, each follower to articulate who *they* say Jesus is. I hope that you can leave each worship today and every week not saying what it is that the preacher believes, or what Presbyterians believe (though it may be nice to have those as reference points), but to leave these doors and be able to say what exactly it is that you believe. This is one reason that we have a few moments of silence after the sermon – so you can think about what the preacher said, then begin to tease out what you believe in the scripture read and proclaimed – whether that is similar to or different from the sermon. The Affirmation of Faith is another opportunity for the congregation (not the preacher) to stand up and together say what we believe.

These moments are first and foremost meant to glorify God. They also serve as rehearsal space for the real world beyond our Sanctuary doors. For if we cannot articulate what we believe here – in this safe space with friends we know and love – we will almost certainly fail out *there*. We need to be practiced in thinking about what we believe in order to both say and live it on the other 6 days of the week. Think of specific things that you believe about Jesus and our triune God. Be able to put them into words. Craft a 2-sentence elevator speech for yourself about who you say Jesus is.

(pause) Peter got it right, but his answer went without celebration. While Jesus certainly was and **is** the Messiah, some part of Peter’s prediction wasn’t quite on the mark. Peter didn’t really understand who Jesus was, or what being the Messiah entailed. This sent Jesus into a diatribe against his follower’s lack of understanding of who he was and what he was sent to do. But if they got it wrong, watching and following him every day, it must be exponentially harder for us, these many years later.

We certainly won’t have the right or magic words. But we can still do *something*. The prophet Micah answered Jesus’ question one way. To testify to God’s identity, to show who we believe God to be, we can do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God. This is the best kind of sermon you can give – much better than any words in a pulpit. Put legs on your faith. Get your hands dirty. Bruise your heart a little bit. In doing God’s work in the world, we are also giving our life, something else Christ invites his followers to do. Giving our time, giving our energy, structuring our life around what we believe (who we *say* that Jesus is), this is our tithe in thanksgiving for all that God has given us.

At the height of the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, when Christians were literally suffering and dying for justice and redemption there, Archbishop Desmond Tutu asked his staff each morning, "If being Christian became a crime, would there be enough evidence to convict us?" [[1]](#footnote-1) The same question challenges us. What evidence in our daily lives proves who we say Jesus is?

Friends, take up your cross. Follow Christ. Consider who you *say* that Jesus is. Consider who told you, and be thinking of who you will tell. Today and tomorrow. Amen.

1. http://day1.org/4048-following\_jesus\_is\_for\_losers Rev. J.C. Austin, “Day 1” Sept. 16, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)