

**Romans 10:5-13**  
**First Sunday of Lent**

**Mark 8:27 - 9:1**

**February 14, 2016**

**WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?  
THE CRUCIAL QUESTION**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

“Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world?”

“Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?”

When someone makes a public profession of faith and is baptized in a Presbyterian congregation, those are two of the questions the person is asked. They are the basic questions of the life of faith. The questions get to the heart of the person’s intentions and commitments. The second question — “Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love?” — is the same question that the sermons during this Lenten season will deal with — “Who do you say that I am?” That is the **crucial** question.

Did you know that the word **crucial** comes from the Latin word **crux**, which means “cross”? How appropriate that the **crucial** question for our lives — “Who do you say that I am?” — is, in its essence, a question about the cross of Jesus Christ! The word **crucial** means “important or essential as resolving a crisis; decisive; marked by the final determination of a doubtful issue; marked by or possessing importance or significance.”

When Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Peter and the others didn’t have a stake in their answer. They were just reporting what they had heard — John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets. But, when Jesus asked them, “Who do **you** say that I am?” the question became personal and crucial. Of course, Peter gave the right answer — “You are the Messiah” or “You are the Christ.” But the story in Mark’s gospel doesn’t end with Peter’s correct answer from his lips. Instead, the story continues and gets at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus who is the Christ.

There is another question a person is asked when he or she makes a public profession of faith and is baptized — “Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?” Now we’re talking about faith commitments and how we live our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.” (Romans 10:9-10)

There on the road with Jesus, Peter confessed with his lips, “You are the Christ!” He answered the second question for baptism correctly. Peter would probably have said he was more than willing to be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love. But, Jesus “began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” (Mark 8:31)

Wait a minute! That’s more than Peter bargained for — or not at all what Peter expected — when he answered Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” So Peter took Jesus aside and scolded him as you scold a child — “Don’t talk like that! You don’t know what you’re saying! Don’t let me hear you saying such things, Jesus!” But Jesus, in turn, rebuked Peter and reminded Peter of his rightful place, if he wanted to be his follower — “Get behind me, Satan!”

On this first Sunday of Lent, Jesus’ question — “Who do you say that I am?” — is still the **crucial** question for you and me and our church. It’s relatively easy to confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord. It’s much harder to live out our confession each and every day — “Will you be Christ’s faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love?” — especially when Jesus talks about denying ourselves, taking up the cross, following him, losing our lives for his sake and for the sake of the gospel.

One writer has put it this way: “We have to admit that Peter’s definition of ‘messiah’ is usually the one we prefer as well. Peter, we, and just about everyone we’ll ever know want a strong God, a God who heals our illnesses, provides ample prosperity, guarantees our security, urges our military and sports teams onto victory, and generally keeps us happy, healthy, and wise. But that’s not what Jesus offers. Instead, Jesus points to a God who meets us in vulnerability, suffering, and loss. A God who meets us, that is, in those moments when we really need God, when all we had worked for, hoped for, and striven for fall [sic] apart and we realize that we are, quite simply, mortal, incapable of saving ourselves and desperately in need of a God who meets us where we are. Jesus’ identity proves elusive precisely because God shows up just where we least expect God to be. Which means that we don’t get the God we want, but instead the God we need.”<sup>1</sup>

Which of us doesn’t want a Messiah? Which of us doesn’t desire to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ? But, which of us wants to give up control? Which of us wants to serve a Messiah, a Christ who not only talks about suffering and dying, but actually suffered and died because of what he believed and how he lived? Which of us wants to serve a Messiah, a Christ who says, “If you want to become my followers, deny yourselves and take up your crosses and follow me”?

Oh, we want to follow you, Jesus! Really, we do! Don’t you think Peter really wanted to follow Jesus and to be a faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love? But the Messiah’s job description and the job description of being one of his followers are just so demanding. Jesus actually calls us to “deny ourselves.” That goes against the very essence of how we operate as human beings. We are very good at self-preservation — on a grand scale and in our mundane, day-to-day existence. However,

Jesus, who did deny himself in order to be fully obedient to God and to serve and save us, shows us that this is the way, the **only** way, the **crucial** way to be his follower.

You often hear about “giving something up for Lent.” That doesn’t really mean giving up Krispy Kreme doughnuts so you can lose a few pounds! Actually, it would be appropriate to talk about “giving something up for life” as disciples of Jesus Christ. The challenge, of course, is that “something” is our life itself — maybe not literally, as in physically dying (although that does happen), but submitting to God’s will, getting back into our place behind Jesus, and letting go of the relentless drive to save our lives at the risk of losing our souls.

The great reformer, John Calvin, called “self-denial” the “summary of the Christian life.” In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin writes:

*We are not our own;  
therefore neither our reason nor our will should predominate  
in our deliberations and actions.*

*We are not on our own;  
therefore let us not propose it as our end, to seek what may be  
expedient for us according to the flesh.*

*We are not our own;  
therefore let us, as far as possible, forget ourselves and all  
things that are ours.*

*On the contrary, we are God’s;  
to him, therefore, let us live and die.*

*We are God’s;  
therefore, let his wisdom and will preside in all our actions.*

*We are God’s;  
towards him, therefore, as our only legitimate end, let every  
part of our lives be directed.*

What it means to say “I believe you are the Christ” and what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ are the crux of the matter. There’s that word again — crux, cross. This story about Jesus and his disciples is at the crux of Mark’s gospel — literally and theologically. The crucial question — “Who do you say that I am?” — comes right smack dab in the middle of the gospel’s sixteen chapters. At the same time, Jesus’ crucial question — which leads him to talk about the cross for himself and his disciples — is the great turning point in the story. From this point on, the focus is on Jesus’ suffering and dying as he makes his way to Jerusalem.

It has been said that when we have a clear answer to the question “Who is Jesus?” we will have a better understanding of the question “Who am I?” In the Broadway musical, *Les Miserables*, Jean Valjean faces a moral and ethical dilemma. The police inspector mistakes another man for Valjean, the prisoner he has been zealously pursuing

for so long. Valjean has to decide whether or not to identify himself and save the innocent man. As he agonizes about his decision, he sings:

*Who am I? Can I condemn this man to slavery,  
pretend I do not feel his agony.  
This innocent who bears my face,  
who goes to judgment in my place?  
Who am I? Can I conceal myself forevermore?  
Pretend I'm not the man I was before?  
And must my name until I die  
Be no more than an alibi? Must I lie?  
How can I ever face my fellow men?  
How can I ever face myself again?  
My soul belongs to God, I know.  
I made that bargain long ago.  
He gave me hope when hope was gone.  
He gave me strength to journey on.*

Jean Valjean appears in front of the court, unbuttons his shirt, and shows Javert the prison number tattooed on his chest. He has made his decision: *Who am I? Who am I? I am Jean Valjean!*

Who we say Jesus is is the **crucial** question because how we answer that question determines who we are. We might sing with Valjean, “My soul belongs to God, I know. I made that bargain long ago. He gave me hope when hope was gone. He gave me strength to journey on.” There are plenty of times in life when we are tempted to be ashamed of Jesus and his words. There are plenty of times in life when we want to save our lives or gain the whole world — but at what cost? Can I conceal myself forevermore? Must I lie?

Jesus calls us to follow him. The first step on that journey is to answer his question, “Who do you say that I am?” During this Lenten season, we will hear the stories of John the son of Zebedee asking Jesus to give him a position of power, of Peter denying Jesus three times, of Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus being asked “Do you believe this?”, of Pontius Pilate being confronted with the truth, of Joseph of Arimathea making a bold and dangerous choice, and Mary Magdalene meeting a stranger in the garden. One way or the other, each of these people is confronted with the question, “Who do you say that I am?” Each of them answers Jesus in his or her own way, both in what they say and by what they do.

One of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s most famous thoughts comes from his book *The Cost of Discipleship*: “When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die.” We’re quick to answer Jesus’ question, but not quite as quick to answer Jesus’ call to follow him. During these weeks of Lent, let us think about Jesus’ crucial question. How we

answer that question — both with our lips and in our actions — speaks volumes about who we are.

***Let us pray: Lord Jesus, dying to save us from our sin, rising to give us eternal life, ascending to prepare our heavenly home, we adore you. Help us to follow you in the way of the cross. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>David Lose, “Pentecost 16B: Intriguing, Elusive, Captivating, and Crucial,” at [www.davidlose.net](http://www.davidlose.net).