



But What About You?

TEXT
Mark 8:27–30

February 16, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Hallie Hottle

As some of you know, I've recently started this new adventure of going back to school. I just started last month, at San Francisco Theological Seminary, to begin to pursue a doctorate in ministry. I'll be there on campus about three weeks every year, while I continue to be here full time with our young adults and our Gathering worship service. When I'm not on campus, I'll be reading and writing and looking tired, eventually researching for a dissertation with your help.

As I applied to schools this year, I found myself thinking a lot about these questions Jesus asks in our scripture reading today. This is the story where we find the language of this sermon series we've journeyed through this new year. Jesus asks: "Who Do People Say That I Am?" We've been looking at different identities of Jesus, through the different gospels.

Knowing and talking about who Jesus is, you can imagine it's something that comes up when applying for study in ministry. I've been thinking about these questions, and looking back at some writing I did when I was first going to seminary. As you enter seminary, and

again throughout the ordination process, you're asked to write a Statement of Faith, a one-page document on just what it is you believe.

I found myself looking through these statements I have written over the 12 years since I applied to seminary. There wasn't anything particularly shocking in them. If anything, working in church ministry all these years has only made me more heretical. What caused me to linger is that I can still remember what I was doing, what I was thinking, as I wrote those early statements.

I remember, in that first summer after my first year at Princeton, as I was home in Illinois helping my mom through chemo ... I can remember marching angrily around my backyard, yelling irrationally about the Trinity. The committee overseeing my work in my home presbytery there in Illinois had advised me that I should include more language about the Trinity in my Statement of Faith. Specifically, they had asked, "How does the doctrine of the Trinity affect your faith?"

I remember shouting into the cornfield behind my parents' house: "The Trinity does not affect my faith!" — probably with

some other words thrown in. And my mom, in all the brilliance of a woman who didn't need theological training to know what was true, I remember her saying, "Then just write that. Trust yourself. And just tell the committee to ..." Well, she'd tell me not to finish that sentence from a pulpit.

I remember that, because what I wrote was: "I believe the Trinity to be our best and still failed attempt to use human language to describe an indescribable God. I believe our attempts to whittle this mystery down to be a fool's errand, one highly amusing to our Creator, Savior and Holy Ghost."

It's apparent to me that I was subtly trolling my committee. It was also apparent to them — making things harder for myself than I needed to. But, I actually think my intention here is kind of what Jesus had in mind with his questions to the disciples.

Here's what I mean: Jesus asks two questions to his disciples in this story. He first asks, "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples have some answers. Jesus is essentially asking, "What have you heard? Those crowds coming to be fed — those curious onlookers — all the world — who are they saying I am?" As Jesus' questions go,

this one is pretty low-stakes for the disciples.

But, there's another question. This time Jesus asks, "But what about you? Who do you say that I am?" It's a harder question. This time, only Peter attempts a response.

My committee and I butted heads through all of my ordination process about my various statements of faith, because what they really wanted was an answer to Jesus' *first* question. The safe question, the safe answer, was for me to be able to regurgitate everything I had been taught, the theology of the church fathers, a quick summary of our creeds and confessions. Just write down what all the other people have said. I eventually did that.

What I was trying to answer was Jesus' second question. In that second question, Jesus doesn't ask, "Who am I?" He's not asking about his own identity. Not entirely. No, Jesus asks, "Who do *you* say that I am?" He's asking about his identity, as it *lives* in his disciples.

The way he asks this question, it makes the identity of the one answering part of the answer. That's a harder thing for an ordination committee to evaluate. It's a much harder answer. The stakes are higher here.

We know this to be true about how our faith is formed. Questions of theology — who we know God to be — are always intertwined with questions of identity — who we know ourselves to be. Jesus' word choice is not accidental.

All of history's wisest teachers have insisted that to know

God, we have to know ourselves. John Calvin, who we largely consider the father of Presbyterianism, whose "Institutes" are a large part of why I never wanted to go back to school, begins his writing by saying: "Without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God. Our wisdom, insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."¹ Our own identity is interwoven with our knowing of the divine. These are big things.

My old presbytery committee wasn't unusual, and they weren't wrong. Our ordination process as Presbyterians is intellectually rigorous. It reflects our denomination; we are a people who like to "think" about things. We want to know if our pastors have learned the tradition, studied the wisdom, if they can translate the ancient languages. It makes sense to start with the first question first.

But I find myself wondering — more so the longer I do this work — if we get stuck there; if we stay on that first question; if we lean on these *easier* ways of knowing with our heads, and avoid the harder work, at the risk of not discovering *something more*.

We have this second question from Jesus: "Who do you say that I am?" Peter is the only one who attempts an answer. Of course he is. Peter is our eager, impetuous disciple. He says, "You are the *Anointed One* (or the *Messiah*, or the *Christ*.)" And Jesus responds, "Say nothing to anyone."

When Matthew's gospel retells this story, Matthew inserts

this extra scene: Jesus gushes in praise of Peter. In Matthew, Peter answers, and Jesus responds, "Blessed are you! And it is on you, Peter, the Rock, that I will build my church." But none of that happens in Mark.

Matthew's version of this story has always colored the lens I read this through. But if we pull Matthew away, if we just stay with this first account in Mark, I have to wonder: Was Peter's answer right?

All Jesus responds is, "Don't tell anyone." *Epitimaos*. It's a charge, a stern order to keep silent. It's a refrain Jesus repeats over and over. Always though, he's saying it to those he has healed, or the demons he has expelled. He's saying it to those who know something of his identity, but who don't fully understand. This is the only time Jesus uses the word in response to a disciple.

We have to wonder if Peter's answer was what Jesus wanted. He wasn't necessarily wrong. But in the teaching and rebuking that follows, it's evident that there's so much more. Deny your own self. Take up your own cross. Set your heart on divine things, not human things. Peter's answer might have been right, but no more right than the demons. His answer might have been correct, but it wasn't enough.

The entire gospel of Mark turns here. It all turns on these questions. Now, Jesus begins the journey to Jerusalem, to the cross and the tomb.

"Who do you say that I am?" If Peter's answer wasn't exactly what Jesus was wanting, Mat-

thew's version of this story reads a little more critically for us. It's on this one, this impetuous disciple who answers correctly but not completely. It's on this one the Church is built.

I wonder how often we, the Church, follow Peter in our answering, preferring answers that are right, but not complete. I wonder how often we've chosen what we know in our heads, without acknowledging what is true in our hearts. And Jesus responds — but there's so much more.

I wonder ... because for all of my life, the Church has been embroiled in debates over what is right. And we have needed to be. When the identity of God's children is at stake, the Church can't remain silent. We've used all those books, all our thinking, to insist that every race and gender identity and sexual orientation is part of the family. We're the small minority in the whole church who does, so we have to keep insisting on what is right.

And during the same time, we now know we've had an entire generation, a generation who largely agrees with us on our right thinking, who have opted out of church. We're still not sure what to make of it.

I spent a few days in Montreat, North Carolina, this week, with a handful of other young adult ministry leaders. It occurred to me, as I talked with other folks about this ministry you've given me to do, that of all the things that make ministry with my generation different and difficult, this is probably the greatest one.

We, in the progressive church, have thought that if we got our thinking right, and if our practices modeled the values our younger generations have told us matter, if we showed that we aren't the hypocritical, judgmental church that dominates our cultural airwaves, that they would just come on in. But instead, what they're saying is "Is that all? Is there something more here?"

Yeah, you got it right. You decided that all God's children are welcome. You've done some good justice and mission. And that's great. But you don't even have to know Jesus to get that right. We're in the minority of churches to get that right, but the vast majority of our nation was there before us. Businesses, corporations, schools — even the demons — get that right.

"Who do you say that I am?"

If we're leaning on Peter's answer, it's no wonder my generation has opted out of church. There's gotta be more than this.

"Who do you say that I am?"

Church, I think we need to consider our answers. We've been taught and trained in the right answers, but our young adults — every generation in the foreseeable future — are not asking for the right answers. We want to know what is real, what is honest, what gives us reason — not to think more, but to live. I think that's what Jesus is asking too.

I have to believe, if Jesus was concerned with our ability to collect the information, he wouldn't have asked who they say he is. He would have just told them.

He doesn't offer information. Instead he makes an invitation to *transformation*. That's so much harder. But for this moment in our history, when the world is asking, "Isn't there more than this?" who is going to speak of the possibility of transformation if not us?

I know that there is more. I suspected it those 12 years ago, yelling into a cornfield, trying to reconcile the God I knew with the identity others wanted me to occupy — an identity I still wrestle with, as I'm called back to school.

I know there's more. I've come to know what the Spirit feels like in my being. I felt her squeeze my heart the first time I visited you, and I ran home and said "no" for months because it was so terrifying.

I know there's more. I've experienced it here with you, as young adults who grew up in the church, who left the church, who have never been into a church, when we all get together and wonder about life and faith in ways that aren't *right* so much as they are *real*.

I know there is more. I've experienced it as tears that are common in my eyes in the midst of the Gathering, as we sing holy secular music, and Communion is gobbled up by children showing us why Jesus always used these as his model, as they're not afraid to ask for more.

I know there is more.

But what about *you*? Deny yourself. Take up your own cross. Get your heads up, into divine things. It's easy to get lost in the noise of our day. And we

do. The chaos wants us to get lost in it. We grow comfortable with that discomfort, dismiss the quiet voice inside us, buy the lie that this is all there is, while not being entirely convinced that's true. The dissonance is everywhere.

We have wise people making weird decisions. We have power creating forced choices between people and resources where there doesn't have to be a choice. We're being tempted to take a side, tricked into believing our sides are our identity.

It's in times like these that Jesus needs a people to answer the harder things. To choose silence instead of noise. To choose prayer instead of pride. To take a long look at our own selves, trusting in who we are, who Jesus is in us, before we allow others to choose an identity for us.

“Who do you say that I am?”

The answer is bigger, greater than anything we can possibly know. And Jesus doesn't stop asking. The God of the universe already knows you, loves you. When we come to know that, trust that, we might be one step closer to the transformation Jesus has in mind.

So for the sake of those who come after us, for the sake of our own souls who suspect there is more than this, let's confront ourselves with honesty, and seek new answers with all of our being.

Let us pray: *Holy God, make us to know you, that we might learn to trust ourselves. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.*

¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.1

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.