

27 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?” 28 And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” 29 He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” 30 And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. 31 Then he 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. 32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. 36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

FIRST READING: Psalm 116:1-9

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I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live. 3 The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. 4 Then I called on the name of the Lord: “O Lord, I pray, save my life!” 5 Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful. 6 The Lord protects the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me. 7 Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with you. 8 For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. 9 I walk before the Lord in the land of the living.

“WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”

One Sunday a pastor asked the children who it is that is brown and furry, has a fluffy big tail and eats acorns? One of the boys quickly answered, “Jesus”. The pastor looked confused and the boy explained, “I actually think it might be a squirrel, but I know that the answer in church is always, Jesus”. Well, in our Gospel lesson today, Jesus, himself, asked a “who do you think it is” question. He was ready to begin his journey to Jerusalem, starting from the northern cities of Caesarea Philippi. But before he began, he asked his disciples, “*Who do people say that I am?*”

It seemed, I’m sure, to be one of the easier questions Jesus had ever posed. “*We got this*”, they likely thought. And they responded with, “*Oh, Teacher, some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets.*” The disciples, without hesitation referred to what they’d heard and read, what the word on the street was. But then, Jesus, pushed them further by asking them, “*And you, who do YOU say that I am?*” And now his followers went fetching for a reply.

He pushed them, you see, to make a move from offering others’ descriptions, others’ opinions, decries, defenses, and deconstructions of Jesus to what they, themselves, could say. He pushed them, you see, to NOT DESCRIBE Jesus theologically, historically, politically, sociologically, colloquially, or biblically, but to express what they’d experienced. He pushed them to not spit back their mind knowledge about Jesus but to say who they understood him to be from their hearts. He pushed them. In a lecture about knowledge and faith, Rev. Scott Stein says, “*The starting point of faith for the Christian needs to be not mere belief in something which ‘if’ true is cause for hope, it is entering into the knowledge of what ‘is’ true. It is following the one who himself claimed to be Truth*” Rev. Stein continues, “*While strengthened by evidential arguments, our knowledge that Christianity is true comes from the internal witness of the Holy Spirit?*”¹

¹Scott Stein. “Prepared to Answer” <http://preparedtoanswer.org/2013/04/19/faith-and-reason-series-is-faith-the-opposite-of-knowledge/> (accessed 9-14-18).

Yes, Jesus pushed the disciples to offer testimony of the Spirit's revelation to them. And indeed, the gospel story goes that one of the disciples responded "rightly". Impetuous Peter, so often the first to speak, said, "*You are the Messiah*". And in Matthew's gospel, which is not as succinct as Mark's, Jesus congratulated Peter on the insight. He responded to Peter's beautiful confession with, "*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven... and on this rock, I will build my church. (Mt 16:17-18)*" Peter's right answer was right because he'd set aside what people said, and he listened to what God was unfolding in his heart. He let God tell him who Jesus was and then, and then, he confessed it. As Anna Carter Florence says, "*It seems that for each of us there comes a moment when what people say about Jesus is not enough. We can't hide behind it or pretend it's ours. We have to listen to God and speak up for ourselves.*"²

We need confess that Jesus is the Messiah. But the story this morning doesn't stop here, nor does our journey in faith. In fact, confessing who Jesus is is only the first step for Peter and for us. Next, we need consider, really consider what kind of Messiah this is who we've claimed and vowed to follow. For "Jesus is not a Savior who fights with might to win, but one who suffers rejection, humiliation, torture and death. He is not one who conquers but instead serves, not one who takes but gives, not one who holds back but loves completely, with total abandon.

This is a much different kind of Messiah than what Peter was expecting and what he could accept. In Jewish tradition the Messiah was to be an anointed king, a royal figure from the line of David who would free Israel from their Gentile oppressors, purify them, and restore their independence and glory.³ Quite simply, the Messiah, for Peter, should conquer the Romans, not get killed by them. In addition, Peter loved Jesus, his teacher, his friend. He couldn't bear the thought of him suffering. He took Jesus aside and rebuked him. And then Jesus rebuked him. "*Get behind me HaSatan ...Satan*". He continued, "*You're not setting your mind, Peter, on divine things but human things. I am not that kind of Messiah.*" "*I am one who loves others and not myself. I do what it takes and am not afraid of temporary worldly threats. You need deny*

²Anna Carter Florence. Sermon: "A Simple Question" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZ1gTdFFkRw> (accessed 9-10-18).

³Elizabeth Johnson. "Commentary of Mark 8:27-38" http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3778 (accessed 9-13-18).

yourself and do the same.” “Those who save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save them. What does it profit anyone to gain the whole world and lose their life, Peter?” “Don’t be embarrassed of me. I’m asking you to help me build a church. This is not a victory story. It’s a servant story. Take up your cross and follow me.”

“Take up your cross”. You know, this phrase is often quoted, but mistakenly. When Jesus said it, he wasn’t referring to some burden that we must carry as a consequence of living in a broken world: a strained relationship, a thankless job, a physical illness or disability. Our complaints that “That’s my cross that I have to carry,” is not what Jesus meant. Nor did he mean that we need turn down a job promotion, camp out instead of stay in a hotel, or deny ourselves food or water to follow him, certainly not. We’re not to pursue suffering for suffering sake. No, what Jesus was referring to when he spoke of us carrying our cross was dying. That’s what a cross meant to 1st c Jews. Jesus was referring to dying...dying to self, self-interest, self-focus, self-preservation. Jesus was talking about us being willing to suffer the consequences of following his way, of choosing the non-easy, non-safe life in order that his purposes are put ahead of our own. He meant being willing to spend our strength for others who are weak, to give ourselves without regard to the time, resources and energy it takes, such that others might experience God’s unconditional love made known in Jesus Christ.⁴

I appreciate the example offered by Rev. Peter Marty of John Woolman, a successful Quaker merchant in the 18th century who lived a wonderfully nice life until God convicted him of the offense of holding slaves. After that, John Woolman gave up his prosperous business and used all his money to work for the freeing of slaves. He gave up sugar even started wearing undyed suits to avoid relying on what slave labor produced.⁵ In 1772, Woolman traveled to England. During the voyage he stayed in steerage and spent time with the crew, rather than in the better

⁴ Elizabeth Johnson.

⁵ Peter Marty. “Christ & Everything Else Thrown In”. http://day1.org/1008-christ_and_everything_else_thrown_in. (accessed 9-14-18).

accommodations enjoyed by some passengers. He contracted smallpox and died, but not before he'd convinced many Quakers to support abolition of slavery

I like that story, but when I think of examples of selflessness, I always remember the story that Presbyterian Missionary and past Moderator of the General Assembly, Marj Carpenter, told. In 1983, she and a group of 22 Presbyterians went to Ghana to meet with Presbyterian leaders there. They had a very difficult time getting through customs because they'd brought footlockers of food for the Ghanaian people, who were in the midst of a famine at that time. Suffice it to say, they were hot and exhausted even before they rented a truck and guards for the food and sent it on its way and even before they themselves were put in an old tired van, which broke down 37 times on their long, arduous journey to their destination. Marj explained that it was midnight when they arrived, so the men of the group were escorted immediately to their rooms across the road, and the two clergy women and herself were directed to the upstairs of an old girl's school, built by the Church of Scotland. It had winding stairs, no electricity, and no plumbing. "We were banging along trying to get upstairs with our bags, and we came to a kerosene lantern obviously left there on the landing for us. We took it with us and let it burn down in the night. "I remember that you could hear the jungle sounds from that place, and the little light was kind of comforting." "The next day we were driving around and saw a line about 8 blocks long of people standing in the hot sun. I asked, 'What are they waiting for?' In our country we wait in line in amusement parks, rock concerts, football and baseball games. In Korea, they wait in line to go to church. In Sudan and Somalia and parts of Russia, they wait in line for food. And in Ghana, I was told, they wait in line for kerosene."(pause) "I realized then that some women had stood in line all day long so that we 3 American women could get upstairs and go to bed. I felt bad, but from that day on, I also saw in a new way the lamp as a symbol of the church, the followers, the lovers of Christ. It wasn't much light but it was so much better than no light at all, and it was put there at great self-sacrifice by somebody, whose name I will never know, and it would be refueled later on at great sacrifice by somebody else."⁶

⁶ Marj Carpenter. *"To the Ends of the Earth"*. (Louisville: Pres Publishing Co., 1995), 67-70

Friends, I think that we are all often more comfortable talking about Jesus or repeating what others say about Jesus than living out who we know, by the power of the Spirit, whom we know that we know that we know he is.⁷ We want to avoid the full and sometimes heavy implications of what it means to follow him, to give him the full allegiance of our love...which includes taking on an always wild and sometimes very difficult ride. But yet, as hard as it can be to pick up our crosses and follow, to help build Christ's church, we know it to be an unfathomable privilege, and it is only then that we come to have the inherent hope-filled and fearless life that Jesus promises. When we place our own selves aside and live instead for Christ, the earthly things which cause us fear, our anxieties and pain are no longer in our sights, but we instead look above and beyond them to bigger, eternal, heavenly things. We can be unhindered and strong and purposeful. We can be deaf to that can beat us down. We can live, really liveforever.

Listen to the last words of C.S. Lewis' book, "Mere Christianity". *"The principle runs through all life, from top to bottom. Give up yourself and you will find your real self. Lose life and it will be saved. Submit to death, the death of ambitions and secret wishes. Keep nothing back. Nothing in us that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for Christ, and you will find him, and with him, everything else thrown in."*⁸

Yes, with everything else thrown in. This is the good news, brothers and sisters. "Are you listening?" "Are you listening to what God is unfolding in your hearts?" "Who do people say Jesus is?" "Who do YOU say Jesus is"? Amen.

⁷ Peter Marty. "*Christ & Everything Else Thrown In*". http://day1.org/1008-christ_and_everything_else_thrown_in. (accessed 9-14-18).

⁸ CS Lewis. "*Mere Christianity*". (New York: Harper Collins; 1952), 227.