

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 20, 2015
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

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Mark 8:27-35

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" 28) They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29) "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Christ." 30) Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him. **31) He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again.** 32) He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33) But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." **34) Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.** 35) For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Questions and answers are an important part of the educational process. They are one of the ways that a teacher can evaluate the progress the students are making in their class. Jesus frequently used questions and answers to test his disciples – he wanted to check out their understanding of him and his teaching. Our text is a classic example of Jesus using questions and answers to teach us.

1. He teaches us about himself with the question: "Who do you say that I am?"
2. He teaches us about ourselves as he encourages us to ask: What is a Christian?

Teachers use different kinds of questions to evaluate their student's progress and understanding. There are true-false questions. Even if you don't know the answer you stand a 50-50 chance of getting the answer right. Then there are multiple-choice tests, or, as some of my teachers used to call them, "multiple guess" tests. The odds of guessing the right answer aren't 50-50 but for students the nice thing about multiple choice tests is that if you have no idea what the answer is, you can guess and still have a chance at getting the right answer. Then of course, there is the essay question. There's no guessing. You have to know the answers and be able to write them down in a way that the teacher can understand.

Jesus questions his disciples in Mark 8, our Bible section for today. At first, it sounds like a multiple-choice question; but in reality, it's more like an essay. Jesus wants to find out what his disciples know about him and what they know about themselves. Jesus isn't out to flunk them. His purpose is a loving one. He wants his disciples to know and believe who he really is, and he wants them to know and live like true followers. Jesus wants us to know the same things. So let's listen in on Jesus as he uses his questions and answers to teach his disciples.

The first question for our consideration is "Who do you say that I am?"

Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" Jesus first asks his disciples what people thought of him. "What are people saying about me? Who do they say I am?" People had all kinds of ideas. One was that Jesus was actually a sort of reincarnation of John the Baptist. John had been killed not long before this. Jesus could have taken this as a compliment; John had been a bold preacher of God's Word, unafraid of anybody. Other people said that Jesus was the great Old Testament prophet Elijah. You see, it had been foretold that someone like Elijah would come into the world when God's plan was about to come to its culmination. However, Jesus was not this one.

Actually, John the Baptist had fulfilled this prophecy. Other people said that Jesus was one of the other prophets of old, come back from the dead—maybe Isaiah, Jeremiah or someone like that. That’s what people were thinking.

"But what about you?" Jesus asks his disciples. **"Who do you say I am?"** Jesus wants to find out what his disciples think about his identity. It’s kind of like a multiple choice test, isn’t it? Question: Who is Jesus? a) John the Baptist, b) Elijah, or c) one of the prophets. Peter steps forward and gives the answer: none of the above. Jesus is actually someone whom the people didn’t mention. **Peter answered, "You are the Christ."**

“The Christ.” That was the person that God had promised to send into the world to conquer it. To win people back to God. To rescue people from the damnation that their sins brought upon them. To bring God’s kingly reign to earth. That’s who Jesus was. The anointed one—that’s what “Christ” means—the one anointed by God, the one chosen for special work like God’s prophets, priests and kings were in ancient times. “The Christ” was the right answer.

If Peter had been taking a multiple-choice test, he would have gotten an A+. Who is Jesus? John the Baptist? No. Elijah? No. One of the prophets? No. None of the above. Jesus is the Christ. Correct! A+.

But Jesus wants to make sure that his disciples understood what that meant. People had all kinds of different ideas about what the Christ, this great anointed one of God, was supposed to be like. Some thought that the Christ was to be a resplendent and powerful king, who would conquer all the earthly enemies of God’s people. Others thought that the Christ would be a super-priest, someone who would maybe rebuild the great temple in Jerusalem the way it was under King Solomon, someone who would be a religious reformer. And there was one group at the time of Jesus who thought there would be two Christs coming, one a king and one a priest. People had all different ideas about what the Christ was. But Jesus had an idea different from them all. He wants all to know not just who his is but what it means that he is the Christ. Listen.

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this... The Son of Man—that’s another name given to the Christ—Jesus would suffer a lot, he would be rejected by the religious leaders of the land, he would be killed. That’s not what people thought when they thought “Christ”. They thought of success, not suffering. They thought domination, not death. Peter was with most people on this. Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to scold him, to tell Jesus he is wrong. It seems he was saying that Jesus didn’t know what he was doing, that Peter knew better. Jesus then turns things around and says that Peter is the one who is wrong. Jesus tells him in no uncertain terms: **"Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."**

That was Peter’s problem. He was giving people’s answer to the question, “What is the Christ?” instead of giving God’s answer. We said that if Peter had been taking a multiple-choice test, he would have gotten an A+. But if he had been taking an essay test, what grade would he have gotten? An F. Peter, along with many people, didn’t understand what the Christ was supposed to be.

People’s plans called for the Christ to be rich, famous, powerful. But God’s plans were different. God’s plans called for the Christ, Jesus, the anointed one, to come into the world and suffer and die. Why? For something he had done wrong? No, for something we had done wrong. God’s plan was for the Christ to suffer horribly, to suffer the torment of hell itself, all to pay for our crimes against God, our sins. For all the times we have failed to love God and love the people around us as we should, the Christ would suffer and die.

We heard it in the First Lesson today, as Christ spoke through the prophet: **I offered my back to those**

who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Because the Sovereign LORD helps me, I will not be disgraced. Therefore have I set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. (Isaiah 50:6,7) That was God's plan, to have the Christ suffer and die. And there's one more part we can't forget: **[the Christ] must be killed and after three days rise again.** Jesus would conquer as a king. He would destroy the power of death. Only he would do it God's way, not people's way.

So if God were to give you the essay question, "What is the Christ?" would you know the answer? What is the Christ? He is the one God sent to take the blame and punishment for my sins. He is Jesus, who suffered, died and rose for me.

The second question Jesus suggests for our consideration is related to the first: "What is a Christian?"

Well, if many people thought that the Christ was supposed to be powerful in the world, respected and adored by millions, then what do you figure such people imagined Christ's followers would be? Rich, powerful and adored by millions, right? I mean, if the Christ was supposed to be successful and esteemed and to do well in the world, then his followers would do the same, right? That's what many people thought. That's what Jesus' own disciples thought.

Have we ever thought the same thing? Have we ever wished that Jesus had been spectacularly rich and powerful in the world? That way, he could make all of his followers rich and powerful. We could live lives of ease and comfort, nothing ever going wrong. We could get whatever we wanted. We could indulge ourselves and have fun all the time. And people would love us. Our churches would be the biggest and most successful organizations on the planet.

However, that's not the life of a disciple that Jesus describes. Not at all! **Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."** Jesus says that his disciples must deny themselves. What does that mean? It means saying No to your own desires when those desires go against what God wants. It means saying goodbye to the things we do—even the things we really love to do—if they are against what God wants. Jesus says that his disciples must take up their crosses. What does that mean? A cross was what the Roman government used to execute people. It's what they used on Jesus. To take up our crosses means to be so closely connected to Jesus that we experience the same rejection he does. Did people mock and make fun of Jesus as he followed his Father's plan? They will make fun of us, too, as we stay loyal to God.

But you know what's perhaps most unappealing to our sinful natures about following Jesus? Well, it's following Jesus – letting him take the lead, letting his will be done instead of having it our way. Jesus takes the lead. He determines what he is and what we are. We don't decide based on our own desires what kind of life we live; we simply love Jesus, for he loved and died for us first, and then we entrust ourselves to him.

Here's a multiple-choice test for you. I want you to think of when a person is baptized. Most of you have seen that happen here in church. Before someone is baptized, the pastor makes a sign over the person's head and heart. What is that shape? Is it a) a dollar sign, since all followers of Jesus will be fabulously rich? Is it b) an Olympic gold medal, since all followers of Jesus will succeed in everything they do? Or is it c) a cross? **"Receive the sign of the cross over head and heart to mark you as a redeemed child of Christ the crucified."** It's as if we're saying, "Welcome to the family of Jesus. Jesus died on a cross. Guess what? You're going to die, too. Right now, God is going to kill your sin. Every day he'll do it, as you confess your sins to him, he will wipe them away. This is a tough life, this dying to sin and living to God. But it's the only real life there is."

Jesus carried his cross. He suffered and died. But remember the end of the story? Jesus rose from death back to life. Now he lives, exalted and glorified. That's what will happen to us, too. We will suffer in this world. The sins that we love, we'll painfully part with those. We will say "No thanks," to many things in this life, because we're following God's will. We will be rejected and despised. We will die. But just as Jesus rose to new life, so will we. The glory that Jesus has now will be ours. Remember the verse that ended the First Scripture Lesson today. In that section Jesus talks about how he will suffer and die, but how in the end his Father won't let him down. As the verse says, **Let him who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the LORD and rely on his God.** (Isaiah 50:10) Our Savior won't let us down. He carried a cross; we will, too. He died; we die to sin, too. But he rose, and we too will rise.

So, if Jesus were to give you this two-question essay test, how would you do? Let's make sure we know the answers that God gives us, not the ones many people give.

1. What is the Christ? The Christ is Jesus, the one who came into the world to suffer and die in my place, to take away all my sins and punishment. The Christ is the one who carried a cross, but who now lives in glory.

2. What is the Christian? The Christian is one who follows Jesus. The Christian dies every day to sin and lives to God. The Christian carries a cross now, but will live in glory with Jesus someday.

Those questions weren't too tough, were they? At least not when Jesus gives us the answers. And these answers lead to life eternal. Amen.

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