

Christ Presbyterian Church
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Rich Phenow
Who Do You Say Jesus Is? | Mark 8:27-30

That seems like it's a simple little production, but it's huge! I can't imagine how much work and time and effort that took. These kids have been practicing for months and they've been learning these songs and these lines and I have to be honest with you, it blows my mind. It's a powerful, powerful thing because it represents vibrancy, and it represents an energy, and it represents one of our values that we are a church of all generations. And how cool is it that our kids can lead us in worship this morning? Heather Hood and her team of Shandra and Abby, they work with these kids. Can you imagine the self-esteem that they're building? I heard a story this morning about a young man who did this about twenty years ago and now he's a professional guitarist. He tried out for services and when I asked Peter, I said, "Peter, where did it all start for you?" He said, "At CPC at a Kids' Musical." So, we don't know how God's going to use this in their lives or how He'll use the message in our lives, but I'm grateful. I'm grateful for musicians like Rich, and Sara, and Jordan, and Matt. And I'm just so grateful for Joe, and the gifts of all of these people, because they're connecting us to God and we need to get connected to God. And then we got all these techno-savvy characters—you don't even see them because they're all hidden in boxes upstairs. One guy, Kenney, he's behind the soundboard . . . you have to watch him sometime, the guy looks like he's playing piano, he's always moving things. Gifted people serving God and seeing it as their ministry. And then the guy who wrote that musical, a member of our church, Joe Lovitt. This guy has a way of using humor in his gifts to honor God. So if you're in agreement with me that this is the Gospel coming to us in a profound and powerful way, then I want you to shout, "Amen!" Are you in agreement with me? Amen! Okay, good. I'm done with the sermon; you got everything you needed in the musical.

Recently I received a funny email from a friend of mine and I got a big kick out of it. It's about a slight misunderstanding and miscommunication. A Minneapolis couple from here, our hometown, decided to get away during a cold, icy, brutal time in January and they decided to go back to their favorite hotel in Florida. They had been there 25 years earlier on their honeymoon. So they called and got reservations and it was an old place. And because of their hectic schedules, the husband had to leave on Thursday and then the wife was going to fly down on Friday. So, he leaves Minneapolis and he gets there and he checks into the hotel and he discovers that this antiquated old hotel is moving

into the 21st century and has computers in the room and it's got web access. And so he fires off an email to his wife, but there's one problem. He leaves just one letter out of her email address, and he sends the email to somebody else. Meanwhile, somewhere in Houston, a widow has just returned home from her husband's funeral and she's expecting comforting messages from relatives and friends. She checks her email and after reading the first line she screams out loud and then faints. Her son comes running into the office and looks at the computer screen and he reads this:

Subject: My loving wife

I've arrived. I know you're surprised to hear that. They have computers here now and you are allowed to send emails to loved ones. I've just arrived and checked in, and I see that everything has been prepared for your arrival tomorrow. Looking forward to seeing you then, dear. Hope your journey is as uneventful as mine was.

P.S. it sure is hot down here!

Oh buckets! Just a little misunderstanding. Just a little misunderstood message, but what I want to tell you is that in today's passage and in this musical there's nothing to misunderstand; there's no miscommunication because the message is very clear, and it's a message that Jesus wants each of us to understand this morning. And it's a message about how Jesus desires for us to answer the question *who do you say that I am?*

Now, start with me in the text the musical was taken from. You know, on the corner of 8 and 27. Hear the word of God as it comes to us from Mark's Gospel:

²⁷Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea of Philippi. On the way He asked them, "Who do people say I am?" ²⁸They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹"But what about you?" He asked His disciples. "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." ³⁰Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about Him. [Mark 8:27-30]

We're bombarded with questions—daily questions everyday—big, important, life-changing questions. Where will I go to college? What will I do after I retire? Will you marry me? What will we name our baby? Will I move in order to take this new job? Will I get help for my addiction? When should I retire? Should I have this risky surgery? Uh, excuse me doctor, what's my diagnosis? Questions. Bombarded with questions. And there are really three important questions that I want us to consider this morning. Two of them come out of the text of Mark's gospel and the other one is the right application for us after understanding God's word.

Jesus and His disciples were on this small road and they were somewhere near a small village in a mountainous area near Mount Hermon. Jesus had just healed this blind man, restored his sight, and now He's with His disciples and He's asking them important questions. He says, "Who do people say that I am?" And they replied, "Some say John the Baptist, some say You're Elijah, and others say You're one of the prophets." They understood that people were talking about Jesus. They were talking about what He was doing and who He was. See, they said that about Jesus, the crowds, because Jesus actually resembled John the Baptist, they were cousins, and not only that, but their messages were similar . . . they were preaching the Good News. The message is about repentance, about preparing the way. And people thought that maybe Jesus was a reincarnation of Elijah because there were so many similarities in their teachings and Elijah also performed miracles. See, they were impressed with His prophetic nature, His character. The average person on the street at this time thinks He's a magician. They think He's really, really inspiring and a good teacher. That's He's a doctor. That He's a chef. That somehow He has these abilities, but they really don't know who Jesus is. See, a lot of their insights are based on their perceptions of who He is. They had seen Him with their own eyes. Many in the crowd had heard His teachings, they were familiar, but they didn't have the complete picture; they didn't have the slightest idea that He was the Messiah. Now, we do that to each other don't we? We make decisions about each other by the way we look or by the things that we say.

You know a couple of weeks ago I shaved off this really cool soul patch I had. I shaved it off to protect the public actually because I was so sick of hearing that I looked like Colonel Sanders. Got on a plane and walked by the head flight attendant, and as I walked by she said, "Hey buddy, really love your chicken." I turned around and Jody grabbed my arm—*come back, come back!* I got so tired of that, but we make decisions about people by how they look. We really do. I took that collar off as quick as I could after the musical because I don't want people to have expectations about me. Because they think if you're a pastor, you're absolutely no fun! I think I'm a pretty fun guy, but we make decisions about people, we make judgments about their character and who they are, but we don't know their whole story. We don't know everything about them and that's what's happening to Jesus at this time.

Now, Jesus gets really, really personal and He goes beyond public opinion of what others are saying about Him; He goes straight to His best friends, to His twelve disciples. And He asked them, "What about you? Who do you say that I am?" Now this conversation is recorded in two other Gospels. We have three Gospels together—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—and they're called the Synoptic Gospels because there are synoptic similarities in each of them. I want to look just briefly at Matthew's Gospel and Peter's response. Jesus asked: .

¹⁵"But what about you? Who do you say I am?" ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." [Matthew 16:15-16]

Jesus assured Peter that he is correct, and then in verse 17 He said:

¹⁷“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.” [Matthew 16:17]

God himself revealed to Peter the full identity of Jesus, yet Peter doesn't comprehend it. Peter knew Jesus was the given name of the son of Mary and Joseph. It was His given name, and Christ, as we heard from the musical, meant Anointed One. Now, this meant that the disciples believed, or had hoped to believe, that Jesus was the one Israel had been waiting for since the time of David. This super human leader who would overthrow all of Israel's enemies, that's what they were hoping for. They were hoping for a king, a mighty and powerful king to do that. And so they're putting stake in their claim that Jesus is the one who is going to overthrow all of their oppressors. Now we know Peter's confession (of who Jesus is) is strong at this moment, and yet the irony is, about six months later in a garden around some Roman soldiers, Peter says, “I don't know who He is. Never met the guy.” And three times the rooster crows.

Now, the third and obvious question, the question for us, the question posed to each of us this morning is: *who do you say that Jesus is?* Who do you say, Jim, that Jesus is? Who do you say, Mary, that Jesus is? Tim, who is Jesus for you? Sammy, who do you say that Jesus is? See, we had examples in the musical—we heard that He was nothing but a great teacher, an amazing doctor, a magician, a chef, a king, a counselor, somebody we prayed to who answers our prayers with gifts like Santa Claus. We create our own images of Jesus. We shape Him into our worldview. Some of us think He's the big bail bondsman in the sky—every time we get into trouble somehow He's going to bail us out. See, we're trying to fit Jesus into how we think and how we want Him to be.

In his classic book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis is wrestling with this idea, the idea of Jesus being who He said He was, the Son of God. Now, this is a long quote, but I want you to hang with me as I read it and then we'll unpack it a little afterward. C.S. Lewis writes:

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people say about Jesus: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things that Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says that he's a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else he's a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and you can kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let's not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He didn't intend to. Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was the Son of God.”

This very intelligent author and writer and philosopher . . . he says that Jesus was more than just a good moral teacher. That He was either a lunatic or a liar—or He truly was who He said He was, the Son of God. Right after this profound proclamation by Peter, Jesus begins to change the whole story; after this, the mood changes and the direction of His ministry changes. This is considered the hinge passage where Jesus starts talking about the sacrificial lamb. He starts talking about the suffering Messiah. Mark's text says that He began to teach them about the Son of Man and how He must suffer and be rejected. He starts talking about His saving work on the cross and that He would be killed and raised to life on the third day. The story begins to change radically for Jesus and His disciples after this conversation.

Two weeks ago I had the privilege of speaking at a weekend retreat. I had to talk to about 200 folks on Saturday night after they had this big ol' honking dinner. I mean that's the worst time to be speaking... after dinner. These people are waiting for dessert and really they'd like to take a nap or go to bed or something. And so I was commissioned with just trying to keep them awake, and I was talking about wanting to be like Jesus. I was talking about an attitude of gratitude and I felt the Holy Spirit in a powerful way in the room; I even surprised myself at some of the things that were coming out of my mouth. And after that evening I heard a story about a woman who got up from her table in a full sweat breathing really hard. She left her husband and all the people at the table and ran out of the room. I got her name and found out her phone number and I texted her. I said, "Margaret, I'd really like to talk to you if possible. I'd love to know how you're doing and what went on." So we got together the next morning, because we were on this retreat, and it was amazing to hear her story. She talked about all the pain in her life, talked about a father who was abusive and an alcoholic. She said, "Rich, I could not explain—I'm a control person—I could not explain what was going on with me. I was hyperventilating, I was sweating, I was crying. I had lost it. And I can't understand why. I can't understand why." I wanted so desperately to step into some sort of spiritual, religious discussion, but I kept listening. What happened for her was that she realized it wasn't about her. She realized that God had been with her the whole time, and that she had been receiving all the gratitude for herself. It was so amazing. She asked me, "Rich, who is Jesus?" I got a chance to tell her and even more, we prayed together afterward. Many of us need, but can't answer the question, "Who is Jesus? Who is this man? Who is this one who's redeemed us?" I am so grateful that Margaret and I had that conversation because I was able to tell her about the restoring nature of this loving God. I was able to tell her that she was rescued by His love on the cross. The apostle Paul says in Galatians 2,

²⁰The life I now live is in the flesh. I live by faith in the Son of God who loves me and gave Himself for me. [Galatians 2:20]

He loves me and He gave Himself for me. Margaret, He gave Himself for you. Now, I can only speak for myself, but I want you to know something you already know. I am a sinner. I am a sinner saved by grace. Grace and grace alone. And I have personally experienced this. I've come to know the powerful life-changing love...the unmerited, underserved, unconditional, real forgiving love of Jesus Christ. I know that for myself. I

know that He's the Son of God. I know that He's the Redeemer. That's what I believe, and not because I get paid to believe it. I believe that He knows my name, that He's called me, and that He walks with me through the challenges of life. Why does He do that? Because I'm precious and because I'm loved. See, you are precious and you are loved. He demonstrated His love for you and me on a cross and He gave us, not only a victory over our brokenness, but a promise that we would be restored through the resurrection and that one day, we would be healed forever. Totally, sacrificially, He loves you.

Now, at the end of the day it really truly matters who you say Jesus is, but what really matters is an even more important question: *who does Jesus say you are?* Know what He says? He says *you're my child*. He says *you're beloved*. He says *I did it all for you*. *I forgive your sins*. *You're precious to Me and I love you*. Amen. Let's pray.

Thank You, Jesus. Thank You for choosing us. Thank You for forgiving us. Thank You for Your undeserved, unmerited love and grace for us. See, it's not about us, it's not about what we've done, it's not even about what we're going to do, but it's about what You've done for us on a cross and through an empty tomb. Thank You that You are truly the Son of God, the Anointed One, the Messiah. And Thank You that You desire us to answer the question who are You to us? Give us the courage to answer it because Your love is so amazing and we thank You for it. In Your holy name I pray. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.