

Positive Identification

Mark 8:27-37

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On Tuesday morning, Amy and I are planning a visit to a place called the Georgia Department of Driver Services. In preparation for that trip, we've been gathering important paperwork about our identity.

Identification is such a critical part of life in the 21st century in these United States. Maybe you've had the unpleasant experience of misplacing or losing your identification. It's an unsettling thing to not have proper ID.

Identification is at the heart of the matter today. You heard it in the text from Luke's gospel, on this Transfiguration Sunday, we remember that a voice from heaven said of Jesus, "This is my Son, my chosen, listen to him!"

And identification is at the heart of this passage in Mark's gospel, too.

We're at about the midpoint of Mark's gospel, so by now, the word is out on the street about Jesus. He's fed 5,000 people with a few scrawny fish and some scraps of bread. He's healed a hemorrhaging woman and brought a 12 year old girl back from the dead. He's brought hearing to the deaf and sight to the blind. If Twitter existed back then, he'd most certainly be a trending topic.

And so as they're walking along, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

One disciple says, "I heard someone say they think you're John the Baptist." And another says, "I heard someone say they thought you were Elijah." And another one says, "I heard someone say they thought you were one of the prophets."

But then Jesus raises the stakes. With one question, he takes it from the general to the specific, from the corporate to the personal. "But who do *you* say that I am?"

And Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

Messiah was not a title that was taken lightly in those days. If you know anything about the Hebrew Scriptures, you know that Messiah was a loaded term. Because in 2 Samuel, God promises a King of Israel by the name of David that his descendant shall rule over the throne of Israel forever, and of his kingdom there shall be no end.

But at that very moment that Jesus and his disciples are walking up to Caesarea Philippi, it's not David's descendant on the throne, but that stooge Herod, propped up by the Romans. And before the Romans, it was the Greeks. And before the Greeks, it was the Persians. And before the Persians, it was the Babylonians. And before the Babylonians, it was the Assyrians. And before the Assyrians,

Israel had been divided against itself during a brutal civil war.

But the Hebrew Scriptures speak of the Messiah, which, translated into Greek, is the Christ. Remember, Christ was not Jesus' last name. Jesus' parents were not Joseph and Mary Christ. Christ was a title, and a loaded one at that. Because after centuries of rule by foreign empires, after centuries of oppression and humiliation and suffering, more than a few people were looking for a Messiah who would be a cross between Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson and General George S. Patton. They were looking for a powerful, charismatic leader who would kick the Romans to the curb and make Israel great again.

When Jesus says, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter says, "You are the Messiah." And in Matthew's telling of this same story, Jesus says, "And you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

And it's a lovely little moment for Peter. And I wonder if maybe Peter begins to envision himself as Jesus' campaign manager and future chief-of-staff. And maybe is beginning to think about a press tour and a messaging calendar and a catchy slogan for hats and T-shirts and campaign buttons. Jesus for Messiah! He'll make Israel great again!

But before Peter has time to even smile, Jesus starts up again with this talk about suffering, and rejection, and death, and resurrection. And much to

Peter's horror, he says all this quite openly. This is no way to run a campaign. This is no way to become king. And so Peter decides that he had better handle his candidate.

And so he pulls Jesus aside and whispers, "Hey Jesus, I think it's great that you're the Messiah and all, but maybe we ought to ixne on the suffering and rejection eh, and maybe let's avoid the topic of death and resurrection altogether, mkay?"

But Jesus is having none of it. And loud enough for everyone to hear, he says to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things."

And then Jesus decides it's time to make it clear what this thing is really all about, and where his campaign, such as it is, is headed. And so he calls the crowd together along with his disciples, and he says, in Ryan's Revised translation of the Greek, "If you want to become my follower, then you're going to have to lay down your ego and your desire for position and power and prestige, and you're going to have to pick up a cross and follow me. Because here's the real deal. If you're in this thing to save your life, if this thing is all about you and what you can get out of it, it's already over before it's even begun. But if you're willing to lay all of that down for my sake, and the sake of the gospel, then you can't possibly lose. Because what will it profit you if you gain the whole world, and sacrifice your whole self in the process? You have just

one life to live. What's really worth your very essence? What is really worth your whole self?"

And those are the very questions that Jesus confronts you with this morning, my friend.

Because people say lots of things about Jesus. Some say he's an interesting historical figure. Some say he's a great moral philosopher. Some say he's a prophet, even on the order of Abraham and Moses and Elijah. But who do *you* say that Jesus is? And what are *you* going to do about it?

Here's what it comes down to for me. There are plenty of moral philosophies and religions out there that teach something about how we can become like gods, how we can rise above our base human instincts and achieve something like a divine life. There are lots of teachings out there that suggest a pathway by which we can get to God.

But the gospel flips that conversation upside down. The gospel testifies to us that in Jesus Christ, God comes to us. The gospel testifies to us that Jesus is more than just a moral philosopher, more than just a historical figure, more than just a prophet. The gospel testifies to us that Jesus is God in the flesh, Emmanuel, God with us.

And so what that means to me is that God knows personally what it is to be human, just like you and me. God knows personally what it is to be hungry, to sweat, to experience physical pain. The gospel testifies to us that in

Jesus, God knows personally what it is to love someone so much that it hurts, and God knows personally how much it hurts when that love is not returned. The gospel testifies to us that our sin makes it impossible for us to get to God, so instead, God comes to us. The gospel testifies that Jesus is the Messiah, the long-promised, long-awaited Savior, not just of Israel, but of every race and tribe and tongue on the face of the earth.

But here's the catch. If you want to be Jesus' follower, the paradox of the gospel is that they way up is down. The paradox of the gospel is that the way to victory is through surrender. The paradox of the gospel is that the one who would be the leader must be willing to pick up his or her cross and become a follower.

Who do you say that I am? Jesus asks.

That is the question at the very center of the gospel. That is the question that you must answer, whether you know it or not, each and every day. You must answer it with your words. You must answer it with your actions. You must answer it with how you manage God's gifts of time and material resources. You must answer it by what you do and by what you fail to do.

Because here's what's at stake. Right now, even here in Athens, Georgia, even deep in the heart of the so-called Bible Belt, there are more people gathered in coffee shops and restaurants and at the soccer fields and on the tee box and at the lake house or

just in bed than there are in this city's houses of worship. The fastest growing segment of the religious population in America today is the "nones," those who claim no particular faith tradition at all.

Much ink has and worry has been spilled about this trend. But I suspect that those people are not really asking, "Is the gospel factually true? Did it really happen exactly as written in this book written thousands of years ago to another people half a world away?" No, they're not asking if the gospel is true. They're asking, "Does it appear to make an ounce of difference in the lives of those who believe it?" And they're looking at you and me. They're listening to how we talk with and about one another. They're following us on our social media accounts. They're watching how we handle God's gifts of time and money. They're observing where we draw the lines between "us" and "them."

Who do people say that I am?
asks Jesus.

And then he raises the stakes, and he looks right at you and me, and he says, "But who do *you* say that I am?"

Thanks be to God, we are in this thing together. Thanks be to God, this call to the discipleship is issued not just to Peter, but to the whole crowd gathered round – to everyone within range of Jesus' voice.

So may we remember that the paradox of the gospel is that the way up is down. The paradox of the gospel is that the way to build a great nation, a

great community, a great church, a great family, is to lay it all down, pick up a cross, and become the servant of all...to lift up the lowly, to reach out to the forgotten, to pray for the unlovable, to speak up for the silenced, to act on behalf of the most vulnerable in our midst. Because Jesus the Messiah, Jesus the Christ, Jesus the long-promised, long-awaited rightful king of Israel, willingly allowed himself to be broken and poured out for the redemption of all the families of the earth.

May we find the courage to lay down our lives, pick up our crosses, and follow him.

Thanks be to God. Amen.