

“Put on your discerning ears”

Mark 8: 27-38

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The story is told about a small plane with five passengers on it that had an engine malfunction and was going down. The pilot came out of the cockpit with a parachute pack strapped on his back and addressed the group: "Folks, there is bad news, and there is good news. The bad news is that the plane's going down, and there's nothing more I can do. The good news is that there are several parachute packs by the wall back there. The bad news is that there are four of them and five of you. But good luck. Thank you for choosing our airline, and we hope you have a good evening, wherever your final destination may be." He gave the group a thumbs-up sign and was out the door.

A woman leaped up from her seat. "I'm one of the most prominent brain surgeons in the northeast. My patients depend on me." She grabbed a pack.

A man stood up. "I am a partner in a large law practice, and the office would fall to pieces without me." He grabbed a pack, strapped it on his back, and leaped out.

Another man stood up and said, "I am arguably the smartest man in the world. My IQ is so high I won't even tell you what it is. But surely you understand that I must have a parachute. He grabbed a bundle and leaped out.

That left only two people on the plane, a middle-aged pastor and a teenage boy.

"Son," said the pastor, "you take the last parachute. You're young; you have your whole life ahead of you. God bless you and safe landing."

The teenager grinned at the older [woman]. "Thanks, pastor, but there are still two parachutes left. The smartest man in the world just grabbed my knapsack."

We are all in midair clinging to some kind of sense of identity and purpose in life, as if our lives depended on it. We'd better hope we make the right choice!¹

This familiar story from Mark's gospel is about purpose, identity and choices. Jesus' identity is just beginning to emerge. He and his disciples have been together long enough to develop a solid relationship. Now Jesus asks them to consider two simple questions. First, Jesus tries to elicit what some might consider a midterm evaluation. He wants to know what *people* are saying about him. The disciples report that some think Jesus is one of the prophets or Elijah or even John the Baptist. As intriguing as this may be, Jesus does not really want to know what other people think about him. He wants to know what *we* think. So he asks the disciples "who do *you* say that I am?" In order to become a

¹ Alyce M. McKenzie, "Finding and Losing Life: Reflections on Mark 8: 30-37," from *Edgy Exegesis* in *Patheos.com*, September 10, 2012.

minister you need to be able to answer that question without much obvious fear and trembling. I have been involved in the process of examining candidates for ministry and have been on the hot seat myself. The committee does not want to hear what Marcus Borg says or what Dietrich Bonhoeffer thinks. Each one of us is a theologian. Did you know that? The committee wants to know what I think about Jesus and more importantly, what difference that makes in my life.

Finally, Jesus asks the disciples, “but who do *you* say that I am?” In a split second, Peter responds, “You are the Messiah.” This is quite a moment. No one has made that profession of faith about Jesus. You would think the others would applaud his revelation, give him pats on the back and a series of “high fives.” “You the man, Peter. You get it.” Instead, Jesus tells them not to tell anyone else what Peter has said. He then goes on to dismantle the image Peter likely had of this long awaited Messiah.

Peter gets it right, but has it all wrong. Jesus may be the Messiah but will act very unMessiah like. Jesus teaches the disciples that he will suffer, be rejected, killed and raised on the third day. By the time Jesus gets to the killing part, Peter can not hear the promise of redemption that will happen on the third day. He is overwhelmed by this reversal of fortune. Peter rebukes Jesus for talking about suffering and death. A messiah saves from suffering; a suffering messiah therefore was unthinkable. Jesus says to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.” Then Jesus says to the crowd, “if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

No matter how cleverly we attempt to avoid it, Jesus will ask us...so, who do *you* say that I am? This encounter happens at nearly the exact center of Mark’s gospel. It marks a major transition point in the story of Jesus’ ministry from opposing all that oppresses God’s people, (by healing, feeding, casting out demons and the rest) to Jesus’ journey to the cross. At this moment, Jesus lays out how the rest of this journey is going to go. The disciples are not ready for a crucified Christ. This is more than they can comprehend. We can imagine how they might have felt. However, our anxiety is brief because we know how the story turns out.

The writer Thomas Woodward recognizes an invitation in this interchange between Jesus and his disciples. He says, “Often it seems like we are dating God---always on our best behavior, never angry or indiscreet, and ever attentive and respectful; but at some time we need to quit dating God and begin working on a serious relationship.” So Jesus asks, ‘but who do *you* say that I am?’ and the ground shifts.”² It is no longer sufficient to quote the latest and greatest theologians’ thinking about who Jesus is; “well, Walter Wink says this or Marcus Borg thinks that.” We are now dealing with mystery. We are now forced to face our fear and our inadequacy. Woodward says, “The Christ stands before us and asks us to respond from what is deepest and most sacred and most hidden within us.”

² Thomas B. Woodward, “Who Do You Say That I Am?” Witness Magazine, September 13, 2006.

Jesus did not want his disciples to merely be observers. He wants all of us to be fully committed. He wants us to take up his cross and follow. I know we often say when we gather for Bible study or Wednesday school, “this is challenge by choice. If you don’t want to answer, you can simply say, ‘pass.’” That might work for a while, but eventually, there is no more passing. Your answer to the questions, “who do *you* say I am?” will transform your life. It is not only the answer that matters. It is the way our lives are changed as we live into the answer that counts.

Finally, Jesus makes a rather peculiar statement. He says, “For those who want to save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel will save it.” As a culture, we are taught that losing is bad. No one wants to be a loser. Everyone wants to be a winner. Everyone wants to come out on top. Might is right. Win at all costs. This is not the life Jesus calls us to embrace. The word *life* in the Greek is *psyche*. It means the vital life force that sustains our inward being. We assume this life force is ours to do with as we please. We neglect to acknowledge and give thanks for the true source of this life force. We become clingy and needy. We cling for dear life to other people, to money, to success, to possessions, to alcohol or food, our looks, the neighborhood we live in or the prestige of our job. When this happens, the writer Alyce McKenzie says, “both of our arms are occupied clinging to our lives—and we don’t have an arm free to reach out to anyone else.”

Jesus invites us to embrace a cling free life. “Those who lose their life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it,” says Jesus. How very odd this must seem. It is in letting go that we find true life. That word *life (psyche)* shows up four times in these two verses. The Hebrew version of *psyche* is the word *nephesh*. Both terms refer to the vital life-force at the depth of our being that nothing in the world can snuff out because it is a gift from God and belongs to God. Take up our cross and follow me, says Jesus, no matter where I go, no matter what difficulties you might encounter, trust and follow. Trust and you will find a life truly worth living.

A recruiter for Teach for America—a program that recruits bright, young people from college campuses to teach in America's most deprived school systems—once came to visit Duke University. To an auditorium full of Duke students she said, "Looking at you tonight, I don't know why I'm here. I can tell looking at you that you're bound for bright futures, success. And here I stand, trying to recruit you for a salary of \$15,000 a year in some of the worst schools in America, begging you to waste your life for a bunch of ungrateful kids in the backwoods of Appalachia or inner city Philadelphia. I must have been crazy to come here. But I do have some literature up here, and I would be willing to talk to anybody who happens to be interested. The meeting is over." An amazing number of students went forward, dying to give themselves to something bigger and more important than their own selves.³

Friends, it is in losing that we find our true self, it is in dying that we find eternal life. How strange that sounds to those who do not possess discerning ears. To those who believe, those who have given themselves over to Jesus and have taken up their cross, it

³ McKenzie, “Finding and Losing Life,” Edgy Exegesis in Patheos.com, September 12, 2012.

makes perfect sense. “Who do *you* say I am?” May the question continue to nudge us to a deeper sense of our discipleship? Amen