

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 16th Sunday After Pentecost, Sept. 13, 2015

Who Am I?

Dr. Kenneth Humphreys
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Mark 8:27-38

Who am I? If I asked you to answer that question, you probably would say things like “You are a pastor” --- “You are a retired engineer” --- “You are a family man” --- “You are a Scout leader.” Those descriptions are all nouns.

You might also come up with some adjectives --- “friendly”, “educated”, “Presbyterian”, “opinionated”, “Caucasian”, “elderly”, “balding” and more.

Now if Jesus asked you “Who am I?”, how would you respond --- “the Son of God” --- “Savior” --- “Lord” --- “God incarnate” --- and more. But you have learned about and studied Jesus for your entire life. You have the scriptures to read. You listen to sermons about Jesus week after week. You have all kinds of resources to tell you about Jesus. You have 20:20 hindsight. You never met Jesus face to face but you have a lifetime of experiences in learning about him.

The disciples on the other hand didn’t know Jesus for all that long --- only three years --- and until the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, they really didn’t know much about him, nor did the general public. Jesus was somewhat of an enigma to many.

The Pharisees, the Sadducees and the scribes thought that Jesus was a blasphemer, a quack, a person to be destroyed.

The disciples for the most part looked at him as a rabbi, a teacher, a healer but they really didn’t totally understand who he was until the last few days of his earthly life.

In our scripture reading from Mark, Jesus asks, *“Who do people say I am?” The disciples reply “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”*

John the Baptist or Elijah? Yes, some people might have thought this but most probably thought that Jesus was a new prophet, not a resurrected prior one. Popular opinion did regard Jesus as some kind of prophet figure which is quite significant.

Many Jews at that time felt that the prophetic Spirit was gone from Israel but that

a great prophet was still to come. Perhaps Jesus was this great prophet in their minds but few, if any, thought that he was the Son of God.

Jesus pursues the question further asking, *“But what about you? Who do you say I am?”* to which Peter replies, *“You are the Messiah”* --- the correct answer to be sure, but did Peter and the others really understand what the word “Messiah” really meant? Not likely --- not likely at all.

To the Jews, including the disciples, the Messiah was understood to be almost “king-like”, someone who would appear triumphantly in the final days to deliver Israel from her enemies.¹

Peter’s answer was correct in so far as it corresponds to Mark 1:1 which identifies Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God but that didn’t correspond at all to what the Jews expected of the Messiah. The Jews, and most likely the disciples, expected the Messiah to reign as triumphantly as David had but Jesus quickly burst that bubble. He destroyed their expectations about the Messiah.

The Messiah was not going to vanquish Israel’s oppressors, put on a crown and rule triumphantly from a palace in Jerusalem.

To the contrary, instead of taking up a crown, he would take up the cross. *“Suffering, rejection, and death will be God’s means of deliverance.”* Jesus told the disciples *“... that the Son of Man, [the Messiah] must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed ...”*¹

Talk about bursting a bubble. He exploded it but he did temper it a bit by saying that he would rise again.

Peter took strong exception to Jesus’ words and rebuked him to which Jesus responded, *“You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”* He says to Peter, *“Get behind me, Satan!”* Wow! What a rebuke.

Jesus is reminding Peter that the disciples’ role is not to guide, protect or possess Jesus. Their role is to follow him, to get behind him. Jesus then said, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”*

William Barclay² said, *“There is the almost startling honesty of Jesus. No one could ever say that they were induced to follow Jesus by false pretenses. Jesus never tried to bribe people by the offer of an easy way. He did not offer people peace: he*

offered them glory. To tell that a person must be ready to take up a cross was to tell them that they must be ready to be regarded as a criminal and to die ...

“Jesus never sought to lure people to him by the offer of an easy way: he sought to challenge them, to wake the sleeping chivalry in their souls, by the offer of a way ... [that would] be higher and harder...

“If a person will follow Jesus Christ they must ever say no to themselves and yes to Christ. They must say no to their own natural love of ease and comfort. They must say no to every course of action based on self-seeking and self-will ... They must unhesitatingly say yes to the voice and command of Jesus Christ.”

The Rev. Lamar Williamson, Jr.³, a member of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina said, *“By leading to a clear understanding of the correct answer to the question, ‘Who is Jesus?’ [Mark] points to a clear understanding of the question, ‘Who am I?’ I am a disciple: a learner who follows Jesus; a follower who learns from him. What I must learn above all is to follow Jesus in his obedience to the will of God, though it means suffering and death to my ego. [We] must not be ashamed of him or his lowly way, lest [we] be shamed by him in his glory.”*

William Barclay² also said, *“God gave us life to spend and not to keep. If we live carefully, always thinking first of our own profit, ease, comfort and security, if our sole aim is to make life as long and as trouble-free as possible, if we will make no effort except for ourselves, we are losing life all the time. But if we spend life for others, if we forget health and time and wealth and comfort in our desire to do something for Jesus and for the people for whom Jesus died, we are winning life all the time ...*

“The very essence of life is in risking life and spending life, not in saving it and hoarding it. True, it is the way of weariness, of exhaustion, of giving to the uttermost --- but it is better any day to burn out than to rust out, for that is the way to happiness and the way to God.”

Amen

1. Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Clinton E. Arnold, general ed., Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2002
2. William Barclay, “The Gospel of Mark”, rev. ed., Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1975 (Quotes have been rephrased to make them gender neutral).

3. Lamar Williamson, Jr., "Mark", John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1983

Note: All scripture quotations are from the New International Version of the Bible, 2011