

“The Ultimate Question: Who Do YOU Say I Am?”
Mark 8:27-30
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Some years ago, I was in a Bible study group with a bunch of other ministers and we were discussing the story of our Lord’s encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman. It concerns a desperate mother who interrupts Jesus’s long-awaited vacation to request healing for her demon possessed daughter and she refuses to take “no” from him for an answer. What astounds us is how instead of immediately getting up from his lounge chair and his pina colada and simply healing the daughter as we would EXPECT him to do, we’re shocked when Jesus SCOLDS her. He tells her that she is a “Gentile dog” and that his ministry is first to the Jews- a response that seems SO UNCHARACTERISTIC of our Lord. However, rather than take his insult to heart and giving up, she becomes ALL THE MORE INSISTENT and thus serves as an example of courageous, persistent faith. Well after some reflection on the text, I expressed to everyone MY feeling that Jesus was DELIBERATELY TESTING HER FAITH, that he had EVERY INTENTION of answering her request all along out of his deep compassion for her and her daughter, DESPITE the woman being a Gentile. “After all,” I said, “Jesus would NEVER say ‘no’ to a person’s needs, ESPECIALLY if it involved a CHILD.”

But another minister in the group took issue with my interpretation. She was convinced that Jesus was REALLY AND TRULY AGGRAVATED at the woman, just as any one of US might have been had OUR long-awaited vacation been interrupted by some troublesome and pesky person. She also believed that Jesus MEANT it when he insinuated the desperate mother was a “Gentile dog” and that his ministry was first to the Jews. According to THIS pastor, because the Syro-Phoenician woman refuses to give up but continues to press her argument before him, ONLY THEN is Jesus won over by her faith and persistence; ONLY THEN does he grant her wish and heal her daughter. She said to me, “David, I could have predicted you would take such a view. After all, you have such a HIGH Christology- you like to emphasize the DIVINITY of Jesus Christ, but I have a LOW Christology and my starting point is with his HUMANITY. THAT’S why our interpretations of this account differ so much.” I found this pastor’s comment to be quite illuminating and the more I thought about it, the more I realized she was RIGHT.

Our debate over how Jesus should be viewed was rooted over a difference of interpretation as to who Jesus is and what his mission consisted of, whether it begins from above and descends downward, or begins from below and ascends upward. Let me explain because the distinction is very crucial- one that represents two distinct ways of reflecting upon the mystery of Christ. A “HIGH” Christology or a theology about Christ “FROM ABOVE” starts by first looking at Jesus as the second person of the Trinity, Jesus as the “pre-existent Logos,” Jesus as the Son of God who left heaven in order to be “incarnated” or “one with us” as a member of God’s creation. Jesus is “the Word made flesh” who suffered and died for our sins, and then rose from the dead and returned to God’s right hand. People who embrace a “high” Christology often have a strong affinity with the Gospel of John who, HIMSELF, has a “high”

Christology- a book that opens with the declaration “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word WAS God.”

The ALTERNATIVE way of looking at Jesus is by beginning with a “LOW” Christology, a theology of Christ which begins from BELOW. Such an interpretation originates with Jesus as a VERY HUMAN FIGURE and it concentrates on the HISTORICAL DIMENSION of his life. It views him as a Jew from Galilee who had an influential ministry which eventually culminated in his death due to the enemies he created. This kind of theological thinking then proceeds “upward” by reflecting on Jesus’s singular union with God during his earthly life as is evident through his prayer to God as “Abba,” in his teachings, in his extraordinary personal authority, and in his compassion for others, including his miracles. The emphasis is upon his HUMANITY and how his understanding of his mission as the Messiah evolved over time. Such a view of Christ can be found in the Gospel of Mark.

The fact is that BOTH ways of thinking about Jesus Christ are based in Scripture and in Christian doctrine. All those qualities which make Jesus human AS WELL AS divine are united in his being. This was affirmed by the Council of Chalcedon over fifteen hundred years ago when it declared that Jesus was both a hundred percent human as well as a hundred percent God, and that BOTH natures need to be preserved and kept in tension with each other. If we overemphasize the DIVINITY of Christ at the expense of his humanity, he never becomes REAL to us because we are never able to IDENTIFY with him. We want to know that he suffered, just like WE suffer, and that he died, just like WE will one day experience death. In this way, we then have the assurance that God is truly “with us” in every way, that God understands our tears and our fears and even an event as ultimate as death itself. ON THE OTHER HAND, if we overemphasize Jesus’ HUMANITY at the expense of his divinity, then yes, Jesus feels our pain and even our death but he is RENDERED POWERLESS to do anything about it. Therefore, it is important that we maintain the TENSION between Christ’s humanity and his divinity in our thinking about him.

However, what Jesus demands from us is not just some theological assertion as to his nature or being. He’s not wondering whether our view of him begins from above with his divinity, nor is he looking for a confession from us about his person that begins first on the human level. Either ONE of these understandings could be found in any good theological textbook. Rather, he’s asking for an honest, heart-felt confession of who and what he means to each of us PERSONALLY. As the Gospels clearly show, it is impossible to encounter him without coming away affected by him in SOME way and the question he wants to know is “Well what do YOU think?” “Who do YOU say I am?”

Forty years ago, I had a chance to visit Israel and Jordan and to see for myself the land where Jesus lived and walked and was eventually put to death in. Part of the trip involved a tour to northern Israel, to the region around Mt. Hermon. There, we visited a small village called Baniyas which in Jesus’s day was known as Caesarea Philippi. There at the base of a cliff was an immense cavern with a river gushing forth from it- what is the upper source of the Jordan River. We visited that cave and as legend has it, it was there that Jesus addressed his disciples with the question, “Who do the people say I am?” From our scripture text, we learn that some considered him John the Baptist come back from the dead, some the prophet Elijah, and still

others possibly one of the other prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah. But then Jesus is not content to let others define for his followers who he might or might not be- he wants them now to tell him who it is THEY think he might be. He therefore puts the question directly to THEM: “But who do YOU say that I am?”

That inquiry “Who do YOU say I am?” is really the ULTIMATE question and it was asked of not just his disciples two thousand years ago, but of ANYONE SINCE who has ever heard his words and witnessed his example, INCLUDING us. Once someone has met Jesus— FIRST, by way of the scriptures, and THEN, through a PERSONAL encounter with him, it remains IMPOSSIBLE to ever remain neutral about him. And the answer Christ yearns to hear is NOT, “Well, the Jews think you are a teacher and the Muslims consider you a great prophet,” nor is it, “Well, according to the teachings of the Christian church and to our Presbyterian standards, you are...” Rather, he desires a PERSONAL confession from us- one born from our faith and not a response that could be found in Book 3, paragraph 2 of Calvin’s *Institutes*.

Before a new minister can be admitted to any presbytery of our denomination, he or she is FIRST required to come before that body and deliver his or her OWN statement of faith. Yes, the members of presbytery are looking to make sure that the person has a basic understanding and adherence to fundamental Christian concepts and Reformed principles, but they are ALSO looking for something MORE- they want to hear something of THAT PERSON’S FAITH articulated in and through that statement. They want to make sure that Jesus Christ is MORE than just a theological construct, MORE than just some memorized creedal statement, but the center of that man or woman’s life, the animating and empowering principle behind that person’s call. And if there is no such “music” in that confession, it can’t help but raise serious questions in the minds of the rest of us whether that person truly HAS a call or is just looking for a job in the church.

When I was in seminary, I had to take a seminar on the person and nature of Jesus Christ. For three months, we examined almost every conceivable aspect concerning the second person of the Trinity including his birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and immediate presence through the Holy Spirit. We looked at how current theologies consider him, including our own “reformed theology,” “liberation theology,” and a more recent interpretation called “process theology.” At the conclusion of our final class, everyone left the room with the exception of Pat, a senior student about to graduate in a few weeks’ time who quietly remained in her seat. She appeared visibly upset so I approached her and asked, “What’s the matter Pat? You don’t look so well.” With tears in her eyes, she said, “David, here I am graduating from this seminary after four years of instruction- and I STILL don’t know what to make of this person Jesus Christ. I’m just not sure who he is and I took this class thinking that I might finally figure it out. What am I going to do when I start interviewing with churches and I STILL haven’t made up my mind about him?”

I don’t remember what I exactly said to her but it went something like “Pat, the question you need to answer is not who is Jesus Christ to the liberation theologians or Jesus Christ to the process thinkers or even who is Jesus Christ to Karl Barth or the Presbyterian Church. Rather, the question you need to ask is who is Jesus Christ TO YOU? What are YOU convinced about this man who has told you that your sins are forgiven and that he’ll love you and abide with you

forever and ever? How has the encounter you've had with this figure touched and changed your life for the better so that you can never go back to what you were and, what's more, you feel you need to share his life and message with others in the hopes that THEIR lives will experience something similar?"

What I was basically saying was that historical theology is all well and good. It can provide us with the terminology and ideas which help us to reflect on his life and nature. But we have to go well beyond the various theologies of Christ when we speak of him to WHO it is that addresses us PERSONALLY and commands us to follow him, of WHO it is that compels our love and wins our allegiance. We may not perfectly understand who this Jesus is with our head, but yet our HEART has a conviction and an assurance which the head often cannot grasp. On the other hand, we may know all ABOUT this Jesus—know all the stories of his life and all of his sayings by heart from years of church and Sunday School attendance--while yet never knowing Jesus PERSONALLY, that is, as our Savior and constant friend. The bottom line is that we can't live simply by what the church believes or what the creeds affirm. Sooner or later, each of US has to face the question, "But who do YOU say I am?" and it is from THAT moment that REAL faith, SAVING faith begins to take effect in our lives and transform us.

Now I have to confess that after more than forty years of serious biblical and theological study, there's a lot about Jesus I DON'T understand and perhaps NEVER WILL. I can't say that the doctrine of the Trinity or the notion that Christ is a hundred percent human and hundred percent divine makes much sense to me. I don't know how Jesus could have been born of a virgin or whether he did in fact perform all those miracles the gospels attribute to him. Above all, I can't begin to fathom why one who proclaimed himself the Son of God would allow himself to be put to death in the most horrible way imaginable in order to save someone so UNWORTHY as myself- THAT, church, I will NEVER make sense of. And yet I can't help but love him ALL THE SAME- love him perhaps in the manner that St. Augustine expressed when he sought to answer the question, "What does it mean to love God?":

What do I love, when I love Thee? Not beauty of bodies, nor the fair harmony of time, nor the brightness of the light so gladsome to our eyes, not sweet melodies of varied songs, nor the fragrant smell of flowers and ointments and spices, not manna and honey, nor limbs acceptable to the embrace of flesh. None of these I love, when I love my God; and yet I love a kind of light, and melody, and fragrance, and meat, and embrace, when I love my God—the light, melody, fragrance, meat, and embrace of my inner man; where there shines unto my soul what space cannot contain, and there sounds what time bears not away, and there smells what breath dispenses not, and there tastes what eating diminishes not, and there clings what fullness divorces not. THIS is it that I love, when I love my God."

I want to end my sermon by referring to an interview I came across on the internet a few days ago which a journalist conducted with Elizabeth Tabish- she's the actress who portrays the character Mary Magdalene in the popular television series based on the life of Christ, *The Chosen*. The show has become an international phenomenon with more than 200 million weekly viewers including such prominent names as Blake Shelton and his wife Gwen Stefani, Whoopi Goldberg, and even the entire Kardashian clan. Ms. Tabish, a 38-year-old Oklahoma

native, was asked the question if or how her OWN faith has changed since she undertook the role back in 2017. Her response was quite telling. She said:

“This show has changed my life in every imaginable way. I was really lost, lonely and confused about where God was before. Now, I see God everywhere. It’s so clear that God is in everything, and love is everywhere.”

But then she said something truly quite stunning:

“I did not have the best experiences with religion growing up. It always felt like a very exclusive clique. I felt excluded. Getting to see these stories unfold reminded me of who Jesus really is and what He was teaching us about how to treat others and how to love your enemy. It’s reminded me to not get too cynical about organized religion AND IT’S MADE ME WANT TO HAVE A DIRECT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.”

Do you notice she DIDN’T say, “Well, having to inhabit the skin of Mary Magdalene every week for the past eight years has made me want to READ THE BIBLE AGAIN or RETURN TO CHURCH or REACQUAINT MYSELF WITH SOME OF THE PRAYERS AND CREEDS I would recite as a child. NO, she said it made her “WANT TO HAVE A DIRECT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD,” and friends, that’s what the CENTRAL CRUX of our faith is all about. The answer to every human being’s deepest longing and most fervent need is A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LIVING GOD which begins ONCE WE EXPERIENCE A GENUINE ENCOUNTER WITH HIS SON, JESUS CHRIST; when we come FACE-TO-FACE with him who says to us, “Come unto me you who struggle and feel overburdened and I will give you rest” and “Your sins are forgiven, now go in peace” and still, “Whosoever believes in me will never die.” THEN, as the REAL Mary Magdalen HERSELF discovered after hearing such words from his lips, we will never want to leave his side EVER!

Friends, the answer to the question, “But who do YOU say I am?” sought by Jesus from his closest followers was one that could ONLY spring from a source that lay deep WITHIN themselves, just as the source of the Jordan River sprang from out of that cavern in Caesarea Philippi. He wanted an INTERIOR response that was PURE and UNFILTERED for it is only from such a place as that that REAL faith can be found. Jesus knew that such a confession conveys more truth, more passion, more conviction, and more MUSIC than any CATECHISM OR CREED ever could. In the same way, he poses that same question to each of US this morning- “But who do YOU say that I am?” And unless our OWN confession of faith springs from that very SAME source- from deep within our core, then our lives--just like our religion--will never be anything but cold and empty and lifeless and sterile, life devoid of any of the MUSIC in it. Let us pray...

Gracious God, we thank you for incorporating us within your church and for the truths and traditions that we have both learned and inherited and now hold most dear. But the greatest truth is that personal confession of faith that comes when we know you personally. When WE declare you to be “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” may it be more than some rigid formula we have memorized but a conviction that springs from out of a deep and loving relationship with you. In Christ’s name we pray, amen.