

“What’s My Line?”

Those of a certain age may remember the television game shows “What’s My Line” or “I’ve Got a Secret.” Where panelist had to guess the occupation of a mystery guest or a “something unusual, amazing, embarrassing, or humorous”¹ in a person’s past.

In the verses just before today’s Gospel reading from Mark, Jesus seems to be playing those games. He asks the disciples, his closest friends and followers, “Who do people say that I am?” It is a cleverly posed question, because the disciples could disguise their own response as if it were the words of someone else. Despite the cover they are given and the many hints through Jesus’ preaching, teaching, and miracles they respond that people say he is John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. It is only when Jesus asks “Who do you say that I am?” that Peter blurts out, “You are the Messiah.”

“Who do you say that I am?” is the central question of this entire Gospel of Mark and it comes at the dead center of the text. Peter’s answer is what Mark wants us to believe. He told us that in the very first words of the Gospel when he called Jesus the Messiah the son of God. When Jesus begins to explain what it means to be the Messiah, Peter rebels. Messiahship for him, and I expect the rest of the disciples, is not about being a Suffering Servant as described in Isaiah 53. Yet that is what Jesus is claiming.

Messiah or in Hebrew (מָשִׁיחַ), means “anointed one.” In the past those designated מָשִׁיחַ were people anointed by Yahweh (יהוה) for a special task. These people were sometimes kings and warriors such as Saul and David. They could also be prophets such as Amos, Elijah, Jeremiah or Ezekiel. Some people during Jesus’ time were looking for a mighty warrior king to free Israel from Roman oppression. That appears to be what Peter is expecting when he chastises Jesus for explaining that he was a different king of Messiah.

Poor Peter, in the space of a few verses he goes from the only one of the disciples who correctly identifies Jesus as the Messiah to the goat for misunderstanding what sort of messiah Jesus is.

Although, Jesus has just told the disciples not to tell anyone he is the Messiah, he calls crowds to himself to explain what following him means. Which is, “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”² That is living our lives in service to ego, glory, fame, money, or power is ultimately a losing proposition. To be a follower of Jesus means to put thoughts of those selfish goals to the side and live in service to the Good News of God in Christ. The Gospel is as it is written in Isaiah 61 “to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to set the

¹ Wikipedia article https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I%27ve_Got_a_Secret accessed February 27, 2021.

² Mark 8:35 NRSV

oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."³ All of that is wonderful but it does not get you a TV show or elected to political office. You might gain admirers but you will also gain enemies. The cost for proclaiming the Gospel is high. Think of the price that most of the saints paid for their proclaiming Good News.

But as Jesus said, "For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"⁴ We can compromise our values, our compassion, our love, and the very essence of who we are in order to get the world or just a tiny piece of it. Then our integrity, our honor, and our soul are gone. The purpose for which we were born is wasted when we waste our lives in that way. Your soul is all that is left when the day is done. You cannot take any of the other stuff with you.

We want people to think well of us, we want to be significant, but we also want to know the truth about ourselves. Even as we seek to do God's will and proclaim the Good news we are aware we will fail. But as Thomas Merton wrote, "the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you."⁵

That is how we save our life, by giving it over in service to God and in service those whom God loves so dearly—the poor, despised, marginalized, imprisoned, lonely, and hurting. That is what we were made for and that is where we will find out true self. That is the self worth saving for our sake and the sake of the world.

³ Isaiah 61: 1-2a

⁴ Mark 8:36 NRSV

⁵ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*.