

## “A Question of Identity”

*Mark 8:27-38 (September 12, 2021)*

This morning I want to explore a question of *identity*: both Jesus’ identity - and ours! That’s the question Jesus asks in our scripture reading for today.

It’s half way through the Gospel of Mark. The disciples have been with him for some time. And now he wonders, “Who do people say that I am?”

It’s not that Jesus is confused about his identity. Or that he needs to know what others think.



I guess you know we’re having an election. And I wonder if any of you might have had a call from a polling organization. Political parties shape their platforms on the basis of these surveys. They’re keen to know how the public is reacting to their leader.

Jesus, not so much. He takes his cues from another source.



The disciples are glad to be helpful. So they offer some suggestions.

One says “John the Baptist.” John was the forerunner of Jesus, and prepared the way for his Kingdom proclamation.

Another pipes up: “Elijah.” Elijah never properly died, but was carried by a chariot up into heaven. It was said that, in the latter days, he would return to prepare for the Messiah.

Finally another disciple chimes in. “One of the prophets.” Jesus boldly spoke on God’s behalf, and in this way could well be called a prophet.

No one mentioned some of the more negative appraisals that were circulating: Things like “Blasphemer,” “Demon-possessed,” a “Glutton” and a “Drunkard.” Not everyone liked Jesus or appreciated his ministry.



But now Jesus sharpens his question. Sharpens it, and makes it *personal*.

“Tell me, who do you say that I am.”

And we can hear that question addressed to *us*. Since we too are associated in one way or another with this person of Jesus. And we too live in a time that offers many assessments of his ministry: some positive, others not so much. I find today that many folks are quite indifferent.

Jesus asks not about these other folks. He asks me. And you. “You, who call yourselves disciples, who do *you* say that I am?”

And that’s a tougher question, isn’t it? Because it pushes us to examine the place of Jesus in our own lives. The ways we understand him. The ways we are prepared to follow him. Or not.

What would your answer be?



Peter jumps in before anyone else has time to even think. That’s just like him, isn’t it? A bit impulsive. He’s in there first with an answer.

“You are the Messiah,” he proclaims.

And as soon as he says it, Jesus tells the disciples to be *quiet*. And you’ve got to wonder: Why would that be? Why not shout it from the rooftop, if that’s who Jesus really is?

Notice that he does not *deny* the title.

The problem is that word “Messiah” is a loaded term. It’s got so many things attached to it. Some things that may be true and others that may need to be modified.



We have words like that as well. I was trying to think of an example through the week and wondered about the word “Addict.”

If I say that word, what do you think of? A homeless man dressed in rags, living on the streets in Vancouver, addicted to drugs?

But what if it's a successful business person, living right next door? What if she is married with school-aged children? What if her particular addiction is not to hard drugs, or even alcohol, but rather to gambling, or sex, or work, or the internet.

See what I mean? An addict could be any of us. You have to be careful what assumptions you make.



In the strictest sense, that word Messiah simply means Anointed. It's counterpart in Greek, the word Christ, is the same. And that's the word we have in our text. "You are the Christos, the Christ," says Peter.

In the Bible, it was said that many of Israel's leaders were anointed: Aaron the priest, for example. Isaiah the prophet. And David, Israel's greatest king.

To be anointed meant that one had been chosen and blessed by God, given a specific task to accomplish.

As time went on, people longed for a leader who would fulfill their pent-up hopes and expectations. An ideal person who would lead the nation to greatness, throwing off oppression, bringing riches and glory, elevating this tiny nation to its rightful place as God's favoured people.

In their imagination, this was a Messiah on steroids. A Christ of their dreams. An anointed ruler as much of their *own* making as God's.

So when Peter attaches that loaded term to Jesus, with all the accumulated baggage that went with it, Jesus had to stop him in his tracks.

"Hold it right there!" he says. "I don't want you saying any more about this. Not until I show you who I *really* am, and what I'm about. And believe me, it may not be what you are thinking."



And from that point on, Mark says, he began to teach them his God-given mission, and describe the kind of person God had anointed him, or "Christed" him, to be:

This “‘Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.’ He said all this quite openly.”

This description is not at all what Peter had in mind! Maybe not what any of us have in mind.

When Peter protests, Jesus turns his back on him. (Yes, that’s harsh.) And even calls him Satan.

He tells him that he’s set his mind on human things, not divine. Peter is full of the world’s understanding. But like I said, Jesus finds direction from another source.

For Peter, the word Messiah meant worldly wealth and recognition. Influence, power and prestige. How many of our own goals are driven by that same desire?



It took the disciples some time to realize this *wasn't* Jesus’ way.

The Christian life is always a journey, always a movement from one place to the next, a deepening of our understanding and obedience, an unfolding of our relationship with Christ.

We all have to start somewhere, like Peter. But Jesus calls us to continue to learn and grow as we walk together with our Lord. It can take a long time, even a lifetime, to learn.

In the next chapter of Mark, Jesus catches the disciples *still* arguing about who’s the greatest. So he sets them down and reminds them once again: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and *servant* of all.”

What did Paul say in his letter to the Philippians?

He traces this *downward* trajectory of Jesus: “Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

“And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross.”

This is the mind you should have among yourselves, Paul says. The mind of Christ.



Here's what I'm getting at. Are you ready?

This question of identity is not just about *Jesus*' identity, it's about *us*. It's about what our lives will look like. Who we are called to be.

I think too often we take our cues from the wrong places. Like Peter, we are influenced by worldly expectations. We find it hard to get our minds around what it means to be followers of the Christ who came to *serve*. And to give up his life for the sake of those he loves.

A servant *Messiah* calls a servant *people* to form and shape a different kind of Kingdom. God's kingdom. Where the last are first, and the least are the greatest. And outsiders are welcome guests. Where people consider other's interests before their own.

And in this strange, wonderful, still-coming kingdom we find life!



But what does all this mean in *practical* terms? How do we actually live out this calling of servanthood?

It begins right here, I think. In the community of faith. In *this* ordinary gathering of Jesus' followers.

The church is the place we learn to grow together and practice kingdom ways.

Here it's safe to make mistakes. We're all still trying to understand this upside-down Kingdom, and how to live it out in our lives.

Here we walk with others. (Not always of our choosing.) We bear one another's burdens: listening, praying, offering words of encouragement.

I know there's a quilting group here at First Mennonite. And I'd be willing to bet that, over the years, there's been as much value in the sharing and conversations that have taken place among the participants as there has been in the beautiful quilts they've produced. Am I right?

In a world where true community is sorely lacking, what we have here today is a gift.



And living in God's Kingdom extends *beyond* the walls of the church: First of all, to the people we are closest to - the members of our family.

Here is a picture of my gang, but I want you to think of your own family members. If you're a single person, think of your siblings, or your closest friends. How might you be a servant to them?

Families are funny things because, although we love them dearly, they can be frustrating and difficult to live with!

Honouring our spouses, respecting our children, caring for grandchildren. Healing divisions when they arise. Practising forgiveness when we are wounded. Being patient when we come to an impasse. All these things are ways of living out Jesus' call to be servants.



And the Kingdom reaches *further still*, as we serve our neighbours and those around us, whether they identify as Christian folk or not. All lives are precious to God.

I was glad to be with you, a few months ago, when we celebrated the 100th Anniversary of the Mennonite Central Committee. What powerful stories of service! What a legacy of cooperation and care extended to people in need around the world!

We wouldn't be able to do that as individuals, but working together we live out our allegiance to Christ.



Can I share with you a short story of servanthood that I experienced?

Some of you may know that after I retired as Pastor at First Baptist, I took on a job doing part-time mail delivery with Canada Post. (It's been my way of making myself useful and offering service to the community.)

One morning I got called in for a route. When I arrived, I found there was a *ton* of flyers to collate before I could even begin to sort the mail.

I made a comment to one of my colleagues, in the same position, that it was tough to get ahead of things when you're starting late and facing such a load.

I might have been complaining, slightly. Or just feeling sorry for myself - I'm not sure which.

But when she finished collating her flyers, that colleague came and stood beside me, helping to finish mine! She could have gone ahead with her own work. But she didn't. And that, to me, was an embodied example of what it means to serve.

I don't know if she's a follower of Jesus or not. But something has formed her in a certain Kingdom way. And I remain very grateful for it!



Jesus said those who want to save their lives will lose them. And those who lose their lives for Jesus' sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save them.

Those sound like hard words, don't they? I mean, does anyone really want to lose their life? I'm not sure I do.

But the flip side is this: Give up your life of self-interest, entitlement and self-promotion and, ironically, you may have just discovered the very thing that saves you!

Because in losing those *self*-centred ways you gain your *God*-given identity. You find your true calling as a follower of Jesus, the Christ. And your true home in the Kingdom of God.

You save your soul! Which is to say, the deepest and very best part of who you are. That which no one can take away, which endures for eternal life.

And that is good news! That, my friends, is gospel!



"Who do you say that I am," asks Jesus. It's not just about *his* identity, it's about *ours* as well. Call him Messiah, by all means. But a Messiah like no other. A Christ who came to serve, and calls us - whatever age, whatever place in life - to be his servants too.