

Who Do You Say That I Am?

Mark 8:27-38

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*Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*

*Then he began to teach them that the 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. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'*

*He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'*

During the children's sermon one Sunday morning, the young minister asked the children, "What's brown, has a fluffy tail, lives in trees, and eats acorns?"

One boy tentatively raised his hand, and he said, "Jesus."

And the pastor was a bit taken aback as the congregation giggled. "Jesus? Are you sure?" he asked.

The little boy considered his answer for a moment and then he nodded confidently. "Yeah, Jesus. It sounded for a minute like you were talking about a squirrel, but I've learned that in church, the right answer is always Jesus."

Who do people say that I am? Who do *you* say that I am?

Those questions have been in the front of my mind this week as I have sat with this text from Mark's gospel in one hand and my news and social media feeds in the other.

Like many of you, I watched this weekend's events in Charlottesville, Virginia, unfold with profound feelings of anger, sadness, fear, and deep disappointment for our nation. At the same time, I was profoundly proud of the people I saw from disparate backgrounds and faith traditions linking arms and making common cause refusing to return evil for evil, refusing to meet violence with violence, and giving public witness to what it means to deny oneself, take up a cross, and follow Jesus, and sadly, even being willing to lose life for Jesus sake and the sake of the gospel.

I'd like to think that if the same events had transpired on the campus of TCU or anywhere here in North Texas, I'd have been there, and many of you would have been right there with me, bearing witness with our words, with our spirits, and if necessary, with our very bodies to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Who do people say that I am? Who do *you* say that I am? Those questions have been haunting me this week.

I was two weeks into my summer seminary internship. My supervising pastor, a wise and seasoned pastor, had seen fit to take a week of vacation and leave me in charge of that Sunday's worship services.

Everything went well, and after the closing hymn, I moved to the back of the sanctuary to greet parishioners as they were going out the door. I was still learning names and faces, and a couple maybe 10 or 15 years older than me came and introduced themselves. They asked me what I thought of the neighborhood, and I responded enthusiastically. And then, the man leaned in, and with a whispered voice he said, "You know, it used to be a lot better before all the blacks moved in."

And I stood there, stunned.

And I confess to you, just as I have already confessed to God, that I said nothing in response.

I said nothing because I was ashamed that because my skin color and his skin color were the same, he assumed that we were on the same team.

I said nothing because I was afraid, that to confront him or push back in any way would

anger him, and would certainly get me in trouble with my supervising pastor, and might reflect poorly on my evaluation.

If anyone wants to become my follower, said Jesus, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For anyone who wants to save their life will lose it, but anyone who loses their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it. For will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?

One day, a few months later, I went to get a haircut. It was a small, two-chair barbershop, and that day, it was just me and the barber. The small TV was tuned to the local news station, which was broadcasting the funeral of Coretta Scott King, the widow of Martin Luther King, Jr. The funeral had been attended by dignitaries from across the world, including former presidents, and it was running long, already into its third hour.

The barber said to me, “You know them *blacks* and their funerals.”

I tried to find a way to redirect the conversation. I said, “I’m a student over at the seminary, and one thing I’ve learned is that different cultures have different customs and practices around death and dying.”

He considered my response for a long moment, and then he said, “Well, at least one thing you can say about Ol’ Coretta. At least she knew what it means for a woman to *submit* to her husband.”

And I confess to you, just as I’ve confessed to God, that I didn’t say anything.

I said nothing because I was ashamed that because my skin color and gender and his skin color and gender were the same, he assumed that we were on the same team. I said nothing because I was afraid of confrontation, that he might give me a bad haircut or even throw me out of his barber shop.

If anyone wants to become my follower, said Jesus, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For anyone who wants to save their life will lose it, but anyone who loses their life for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save it. For will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?

Who do people say that I am? Who do *you* say that I am?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a pastor and theologian who lived in Germany during the rise of

the Nazi movement during the 1930s. He was a staunch voice of resistance to the Nazi regime, and though he was executed in 1945, his writings live on to this day. And in his writings, Bonhoeffer observes that to choose not act is, in fact, to act. And by the same token, to not speak, is, in fact, to speak.

When I chose not to act, not to speak in the narthex of the church and in the barber shop, my silence spoke volumes. I was presented with an opportunity to practice discipleship - to deny myself, take up my cross, and follow Jesus, risking conflict, risking a bad evaluation, a bad haircut, and instead I ducked it.

In his letter from a Birmingham Jail, the Rev. Dr. King observed, “We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.”

So I confess to you, just as I’ve confessed to God, my complicity with evil through my silence and inaction, and I repent from it.

Who do people say that I am? Who do *you* say that I am?

I’d like to think that if events were transpiring in Fort Worth like what we saw in Charlottesville this weekend, you most of us would be there, arm in arm, ready to bear witness to the love, justice, and peace of Christ.

But most of the time, that’s not how this kind of evil manifests itself.

Most of the time, it’s in a casual conversation.

It’s in an off-handed remark.

It’s in a joke shared around the water cooler or in the locker room.

It’s not usually up and in your face with torches and bullhorns. It’s sly and subtle with a wink and a nod. But it’s still evil nonetheless.

And for most of us in this room, but certainly not all of us, it doesn’t cost us anything to stay silent in the face of this kind of evil. We don’t have to laugh or endorse it, but if we just keep silent and don’t say or do anything, we don’t have to risk confrontation or a bad evaluation or a bad haircut. We can afford to keep silent.

Or so we think.

As Dr. King warned us, all that is necessary for evil to prevail is for good people to do nothing and keep silent. To not act is, in fact, to act. To not speak is, in fact, to speak.

And so I'll share with you a little tip that a friend shared with me. When someone is giving you that wink wink, nudge nudge thing, that thing that somewhere deep inside you says this isn't right, but I'm not sure how to respond, here's something you can say. You can lean in, look them in the eye, and say, "I'm not sure what you mean. Tell me more about that."

This approach does two things. First, it doesn't for a moment suggest that you're agreeing with the premise of the person's remark, but it signals to them that you're paying attention and that you're genuinely interested in what they have to say.

When you respond with, "Say more about that," to the wink-wink nudge-nudge evil, it shows that you value the other person, despite the evil they're speaking, and it provides an opportunity for them to either walk back what they were about to say or to come right out and say it.

Either way, *you're* still speaking and acting and not allowing yourself to be complicit with evil through silence.

All summer long, we've been having some conversation about missional reimagination. We've been thinking about what it means to be the church of Jesus Christ in the 21st century.

And I am convinced that what happens out there, in your offices and in your schools and in your homes and in your social groups, in your conversations around the coffee pot and at the park and even in your social media feeds, those things will have a far greater impact on the church than what happens in here for a couple of hours on Sunday mornings a few times a month.

For the people out there are still talking about Jesus. They're still asking questions about him, all these years later.

For the most part, they're not asking, "Is the gospel true?"

They're asking, "Does it *make a difference*?"

And to answer that question, they're really not looking at we pastors and theologians.

They're looking at you. They're watching how you act, or how you choose not to act. They're listening to how you speak, and also observing how and when you choose not to speak.

Who do people say that I am? Who do *you* say that I am?

Most of the time, when the word *you* shows up in the bible, it's plural. Most of the time, when you shows up in Scripture, it's appropriate to translate it into the Texan *y'all*.

But not in this case. When Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am," the "*you*" is singular. It's personal.

Who do people say that I am? Who do *you* say that I am?

Amen.