

Who Do We Say Jesus Is?
Mark 8: 27 – 29

(preached September 15, 2024)

For many weeks now, Jesus, with the help of his disciples, has been teaching and healing around the Sea of Galilee. But in our passage for today, they have traveled to Caesarea Philippi. It's a long way from Galilee to Caesarea Philippi. It was a very long walk for them. Caesarea Philippi is on the slopes of Mount Hermon. If you go there today, you can find a stream that people say is the source of the River Jordan, the very beginning of that sacred river.

If you climb a ways up Mount Hermon, you can see right down the river valley. In Jesus' day, you would have seen a temple, built of gleaming white marble. The temple was dedicated to Caesar. The temple made a powerful statement that Caesar, the Roman emperor, was divine. That magnificent temple said that Caesar was a god who deserved to be worshiped.

It's no accident that Jesus brings his disciples to Caesarea Philippi. He wanted to go deeper with them in the life of the spirit, and he could hardly have chosen a better place to talk about spiritual life. At Caesarea Philippi, people worship Roman gods. The very air is redolent with tales of pagan gods and goddesses. As the disciples look at the river, they might well be thinking of their ancestors, led by their God across that river to the Promised Land. The atmosphere in Caesarea Philippi invites conversation about mysteries and miracles of faith.

Here, Jesus has a question for the disciples. He asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples reply that some think he is a prophet like Isaiah or Jeremiah. Others, they say, think he is John the Baptist. Then Jesus gets to a deeper, more important question. "Who do *you* say that I am?" he asks. And Peter, always the first to speak up, makes an amazing confession. He says, "You are the Messiah." You are the One sent from God to reconcile the world with God's gracious purposes.

In Hebrew, the word *Messiah* means "anointed One." The Greek word "Christ" also means "the anointed One," the One God has chosen to redeem his people and reconcile the world with God's own self. So when we talk about Jesus Christ, the name Christ is not his last name; it's his title. Here, at Caesarea Philippi, Peter is the first to use that title; to say that Jesus is "the Christ," the One through whom God will be reconciled with the world.

How would you and I answer Jesus' question today? Who do we say that he is? We have many names for Jesus. In our UCC Statement of Faith, we say that Jesus Christ is "the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior." At confirmation, when students write their own personal statements of faith, they call Jesus "mentor," "bearer of sins," unselfish Savior." At the end of our lives, when we are commended to God, we are blessed in the name of Jesus, "that great Shepherd of the Sheep."

Who do we say that he is? When I work with confirmation classes, I ask the students how they would describe Jesus to someone who had never met him. They respond with words like kind, loving, faithful. A teacher. A healer. A friend. Usually, these young people have attended Sunday School, so it's not surprising that that's what they come up with when they are asked to describe Jesus.

When I was in Sunday School, it was very much the same. Jesus was kind, loving, faithful: the good shepherd. On the cover of my Bible was a picture of a man in a long white robe, standing outdoors in a field, holding a lamb in his arms. For me as a child, Jesus was the gentle, generous friend, who loved me unconditionally. Jesus would provide for my needs.

My notion of Jesus was a bit like the notion a little boy had, in Europe, in the years just after World War II. Like a lot of children in Europe at that time, the boy had lost both of his parents. He lived on the streets of the city; he lived hand to mouth. Every day was a struggle to find enough to eat. Early one day, a soldier walking by saw the boy standing at the window of a pastry shop. His nose was pressed against the glass. Inside, the baker was mixing ingredients for a fresh batch of doughnuts. The soldier stood and watched as the hungry boy stared in silence, watching the baker's every move.

The window was steamed up from the heat of the stove, but the boy could see the mouthwatering morsels as they were being pulled from the fryer, piping hot. He watched the baker place them ever so carefully on the glass counter.

As the soldier looked at the boy, his heart went out to him. "Son," he said, "would you like some of those?"

"Oh...yes, I would!" the boy replied.

The soldier stepped inside and bought a dozen, put them in a bag, and walked back to where the boy was standing in the foggy cold. He smiled, held out the bag, and said simply, "Here you go."

As he turned to walk away, the soldier felt a tug on his coat. He turned around to see the boy looking up at him with awe. He asked quietly, "Mister...are you Jesus?"

That loving, generous Jesus was the Jesus of my childhood. The kind shepherd who would provide for my needs.

Who do we say that he is? I think the answer to that question might change over time. It did for me. As I got older, I was no longer satisfied with that kind Jesus who was always giving. It didn't seem enough for me just to be receiving from him. It made me feel too passive and I wanted to be active. I wanted *do* more. Jesus became the wise teacher, calling me to action. I read his sayings from the Sermon on the Mount, and took them to heart. Sayings like, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

And, I thought at the time, if Jesus is a wise teacher, following Jesus means being a good student. Following Jesus means receiving the wisdom he teaches, and trying to live by it. As a young adult, that's what I did: I was a good student, following Jesus, the wise teacher. He was a wise teacher in the same way that Buddha was a wise teacher, in the same way that Confucius was a wise teacher. He was a teacher who had lived a good

life. He was a teacher who gave us a fine example of ethical behavior. For me as a young adult, following Jesus was mostly a matter of using my head: learning his teachings. Following Jesus meant being guided by his teachings my head.

But as the years went by, being guided his teachings in my head wasn't enough anymore. I was no longer a student, preparing for real life. Real life had begun and I was living it. New relationships called for new ways of living and loving. I got married. My husband and I were blessed with three children. When the kids were young, it was hard for me, especially after we moved to a new community. All day my husband was at work. I was what people today call a stay at home mom. I was alone with three young kids in a new town.

Day after day, I felt the stress of being a parent. In the midst of that stress, my head didn't help me much. I struggled with anxiety. I worried about my kids. I asked myself, are my kids going to be OK? Over and over, I asked myself, am I being a good enough mother? All the learning in my head couldn't answer those anxious questions. All the learning in my head couldn't calm the anxiety. I needed a Jesus who did more than fill my head with teachings. I needed a Jesus who could come into my heart with love.

By the grace of God, I was led to a congregation who showed me that loving Jesus. I began to attend Union Congregational Church in North Reading with my children. The people of that church, with their kind ways, showed me a Jesus who was more than a teacher; a Jesus who was not only a teacher, but also a healer of anxious hearts. The first day I went to that church, my first stop, with three young children in tow, was the church nursery. A kind woman greeted me, welcomed the kids into the nursery, and said, "Now we're all set. You go on and enjoy the service." With those simple words, that woman showed me Jesus: a Jesus who could heal my anxious heart.

And so, week after week, in worship and fellowship, that congregation showed me Jesus. They welcomed me, accepted me. I joined the choir. I taught Sunday School. Later, as the years went by, I served on the Mission Committee and the Search Committee for a new pastor.

I had come to that church feeling anxious and feeling alone. Everything I knew in my head couldn't calm the anxiety, but that congregation showed me the Jesus who could heal my anxious heart.

Who do we say that he is? If we say Jesus is a wise teacher, we become students, guided by what we have learned. And there's a lot we can learn as people of faith. Jesus the teacher can help our minds grow in wisdom. That wisdom in our heads can serve to guide us. But Jesus offers us so much more. Jesus is also a healer, who can fill our hearts with love and peace.

Some years ago, on an island very far from here, people came to know Jesus. They didn't come to know him from a book or a lecture. They came to know him from a life that was lived among them. It began when, years before, a missionary had been lost

at sea, and washed up on the shore of their island. The missionary was half dead from starvation, exposure, and seawater. The people who found him brought him back to the village and nursed him back to health. After that, he lived among them for twenty years. During all that time, he confessed no faith. He sang no songs. He preached no sermons. He neither read nor recited any Scripture. He made no personal faith claim.

But when people were sick, he attended them, sitting long into the night. When people were hungry, he gave them food. When people were lonely, he kept them company. When disputes arose, he always took the side of those who had been wronged. There was not a single human condition with which he did not identify.

So twenty years went by. One day missionaries came from the sea to the village. They began talking to people about a man called Jesus. After the people heard about Jesus, they insisted that he had been living among them for twenty years. "Come," they said to the visitors. "This man has been living among us. We will introduce you to him."

They led the missionaries to a hut. There they found their long-lost fellow missionary, whom they had thought was dead.

Who do we say that Jesus is? He is Lord and Savior; shepherd, teacher, helper, healer. We may call him by different names at different times in our lives. Who he is may change for us. But he doesn't change. Whether we are young or older, seeking or settled, looking for wisdom or looking for healing, he is always ready to enter our hearts and fill us with peace: a peace the world cannot give or take away.

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Pentecost 17