

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
James 3:1-12, Psalm 19, Mark 8:27-38  
September 13, 2015  
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By now all of us with children are probably glad that they are back in school as much as we hate to see the summer end. I can remember vividly the first morning I woke up in the fall of 1972 and realized that, after being in school continuously for 17 years, I didn't have to go to class, write a paper or study for a test. It was a thrill to be free at last from the demands of academia.

While Jewish people have always emphasized the importance of education, Jesus' disciples had been far removed from the years spent in their local synagogue school, when Jesus puts them to a test of sorts. "Who do people say that I am?" Everything happens quickly in Mark's gospel, and so the 12 have immediate and consistent answers – John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets.

Jesus couldn't have felt bad about their answers to his question for all these were highly regarded by the Jewish people.

If the disciples passed Part A of Jesus little pop quiz with flying colors, Part B would prove a little more difficult. "But who do you say that I am?"

The answer to such a question as this is not simply repeating what is in the mind of others, but stating clearly what is in your own mind. It is the difference between a multiple choice exam and having to answer a question with an essay. It is always easier to repeat what we have heard others say than to come up with our own original ideas.

As we start a new school year, it is important to articulate in our own minds who Jesus is to us. What role does he play in our lives? How would I tell someone else the place Jesus occupies in my daily life?

Let me try briefly with the understanding that this is a fluid answer and one that has emerged with time and circumstances and will undoubtedly continue to evolve.

I would begin by saying that Jesus is my ultimate hero. He had the undaunted courage to forge a new path at odds with his culture and his Jewish faith, which were largely one and the same. He followed that path nearly totally alone with only the conviction that it was somehow the prompting of his God. He defied the powerful and obeyed the commandment to love even those whom his religion had determined were deserving of rejection. He dreamed of and committed himself to the creation of a world without suffering or deprivation and yet gave himself over to suffering and deprivation to accomplish it. For these reasons, I believe that

Jesus was divine, is worthy of my praise, loyalty, trust and followership, as imperfectly as I do all these.

I hope you will think about your own answer.

You've heard the saying, "It is better to be silent and thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt." All the disciples seem mindful of this saying and are tight lipped when Jesus asks them who they think he is except the one who never refuses an opportunity to speak. Peter, in this case, gets the answer right, but as he will learn shortly, he doesn't understand the full implications of what he is saying.

You see, Jesus has redefined the meaning of the messiah for himself. It was universally understood by every Jew that God's messiah would be a divinely inspired, earthly leader and king capable of inspiring and igniting a Jewish uprising against Israel's enemies. Then the nation of Israel would rule the world, and the Jewish God would reign supreme over all with equity and perfect justice.

We can imagine the disciple's surprise then when Jesus begins to tell them of his impending suffering, rejection and death at the hands of the Jewish leaders. That scenario cannot possibly lead to victory.

It would be like someone who claims to have a get-rich-quick scheme that involves giving everything he owns away or the prison escape artist who insists on being shackled and thrown into a maximum security cell.

Peter cannot believe what he is hearing, and he lets Jesus know it. The next thing he knows, Jesus is calling him Satan for having a mind set on survival rather than certain suicide.

As I said earlier, Jesus is redefining the role of the Jewish messiah from a winner, by our standards, to a loser, from a victor to a victim. "For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake and the gospel, will save it." Here in America, most people are trying to save a life based on preserving themselves by means of increasing wealth, power, prestige or popularity. That life will ultimately be lost because it won't endure after we die. That kind of self-directed or self-absorbed, ego-driven existence is limited to this age and ends when our flesh fails us. It's what we might call the "small L" life or inferior life.

On the other hand, if we are willing to let go of or forsake this inferior life, a new, larger or "capital L" Life can replace it. This larger life is characterized by unfettered selflessness and joy-filled service toward others. It is called "eternal life" in the Bible because it will endure beyond this earthly existence. It is God's way of life.

Let me end with a parable by the Danish philosopher, poet and theologian, Soren Kierkegaard, which I think summarizes what Jesus has been trying to tell us this morning.

Once there was a small town where the citizens claimed to have high regard for the fire chief and his crew. One day a fire broke out in a local storage building. The flames rose high in the sky as the fire truck was delayed by road construction. The town's people ran to the warehouse with squirt guns and every so often fired on the burning building to no effect. When the fire chief finally arrived and saw what was happening, he cried, "What are you doing?" A spokesman for the town's people said, "We believe in the good work you do in the community, and we all wanted to support your efforts with our humble contributions." Then the locals nodded their approval and turned to squirt the fire a few more times.

Exasperated, the fire chief said, "Go home, all of you! Fires like this are not for well-meaning people who want to make limited contributions. Such situations demand firemen who are ready to risk their lives in putting out flames."

Kierkegaard ends his story with this question to the reader, presumably the church, "Who do we say we are? Good hearted bystanders or firemen?" AMEN.