

Who Do You Say I Am?

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Luke 9:18-27

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

...these students... liked Jesus, but they didn't like his followers.

Dan Kimball serves a church in Santa Cruz, California, ministering primarily to people in their 20s and 30s. He says the 20- and 30-somethings are big fans of Jesus but less thrilled with Jesus' followers and the churches where they worship. To prove his point, he took a camcorder to a California state university and asked students two questions: "What do you think of when you hear the name Jesus?" And "What do you think of when you hear the word Christian?"

When students were asked the question about Jesus, they became animated. He received comments such as "Jesus is beautiful." "He is a wise man, like a shaman or a guru." "He came to liberate women." One student went so far as to say, "Jesus was enlightened. I'm on my way to becoming Christian."

In response to the second question, students' disposition changed markedly. They were far less complimentary about Jesus' followers, using words such as dogmatic, judgmental and hypocritical.

What did Kimball learn from these students? They liked Jesus, but they didn't like his followers. Ouch!

Arthur Burns, a Jewish economist of great influence in Washington during the tenure of several

presidents, was once asked to pray at a gathering of evangelical politicians. Burns surprised the guests with his prayer: "Lord, I pray that Jews would come to know Jesus Christ. And I pray that Buddhists would come to know Jesus Christ. And I pray that Muslims would come to know Jesus Christ." And then, most stunning of all, "Lord, I pray that Christians would come to know Jesus Christ."

May we become Christians who know Jesus Christ!

There was considerable speculation, no doubt fueled by his miracles, about Jesus' identity in the first century. When Jesus calms the storm on the high sea, his disciples ask one another, "Who is this that even the wind and sea obey him?" (Luke 8:25).

The word on the street is that Jesus is John come back from the dead or the prophet Elijah, who had left Earth in a chariot of fire and was now making a cameo appearance. King Herod doesn't know what to think. He had already made short work of John the Baptist. "So who is this I keep hearing about?" (Luke 9:8-9).

While Jesus and his disciples in Luke's gospel are gathered for prayer, suddenly Jesus pops the question, "Who do the crowds say I am?" (Luke 9:18). His disciples rehearse the possibilities. "Some say

... people are willing to grant Jesus the status of a great... teacher but are unwilling to bestow on him the title Messiah.

you are John the Baptist; others speculate you are Elijah or one of the prophets” (9:19).

Jesus intensifies his original question when he asks it a second time: “Who do you say I am?” (Luke 9:20). The pronoun “you” is placed in emphatic position, so the question literally reads, “And you, what are you saying about me? Who am I?”

Peter doesn’t hesitate, “[You are] the Christ of God” (9:20). Peter says, in effect, You’re not only the forerunner to the Messiah, you’re the Messiah. Christ is not Jesus’ last name. Christ is Jesus’ title; he is called Jesus the Christ. “Christos” is the Greek word for Messiah. Messiah is a Hebrew word meaning “the anointed one of God.” In the Old Testament, kings and prophets were anointed. Here in the New Testament, God anoints Jesus for his redemptive mission.

We are focusing this year on God’s Big Story of creation, fall and redemption. We are created to live in relationship with God. Sin, however, severs the relationship. In theological terms, we call it the fall. So God takes the initiative to redeem the relationship. Jesus Christ redeems people back into relationship with God.

Who is Jesus Christ? He is the Messiah. Some people are willing to grant Jesus the status of a great prophet or teacher but are unwilling to bestow on him the title Messiah. Messiah, make no mistake about it, is a claim to divinity.

Bono, the lead singer of the rock group U2, seems an unlikely

source of insight on the subject of Jesus’ divinity. But in response to the question of whether the claim of Jesus’ divinity was farfetched, Bono answers, “No, it’s not far-fetched to me. Look, the secular response to the Christ story always goes like this: he was a great prophet, obviously a very interesting guy, had a lot to say along the lines of other great prophets, be they Elijah, Muhammad, Buddha or Confucius. But actually Christ doesn’t allow you that. He doesn’t let you off that hook. Christ says: No, I’m not saying I’m a teacher. Don’t call me a teacher. I’m not saying I’m a prophet. I’m saying: I’m the Messiah. I am God incarnate. And people say: No, no, please, just be a prophet. A prophet, we can take... Just don’t mention the ‘M’ word, Messiah!”

Why, then, does Jesus ask his disciples in verse 21 to keep his messianic status a secret? You might think Jesus would welcome his disciples spreading word of his messianic mission. Let’s set the context. Feelings of nationalism were at a fever pitch in Israel. The Jews were awaiting a political Messiah, who would liberate them from Roman rule. Jesus doesn’t want to be equated with a political Messiah. He wants them to get it right before they get it wrong.

Jesus announces in verse 22, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” Notice Jesus avoids the politically loaded term, “Son of God.” Instead, he prefers a more enigmatic term,

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“Son of Man,” taken from the prophecy of Daniel.

Let’s consider each word slowly. “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering.” The auxiliary verb “must” suggests Jesus’ suffering is of divine necessity. “...and ‘be rejected’ by” the religious establishment. Then, “he must be killed.” His death has the imprint of divine necessity, as well. Finally, “on the third day he will be raised to life.” As I read these words, the Apostles’ Creed comes into view: “...suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified dead and buried...the third day he rose again from the dead.”

Who is Jesus? He is the Messiah. And what is his mission? His mission is to die for our sins.

So what? So what do these words of Jesus have to do with my life? Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow me” (9:23).

First, “If any want to become my disciples, let them deny themselves...” So there is no confusion, Jesus amplifies what he means in the verses that follow: “For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will save it. What does it profit them if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves” (9:24-25).

What does Jesus mean that some things are lost by being saved and saved by being lost? Love is like that. Love is lost by being hoarded and gained by being given away. Life is not saved by

being accumulated. It is gained by being given away.

Jesus urges us to say “No” to self-serving ambitions and “Yes” to God’s purposes. He bids us to die to selfishness and live for selflessness. It is sheer folly to amass all this world has to offer and lose what really matters.

Second, “If any want to become my followers, let them...take up their cross daily.” It was customary for condemned criminals in the first century to carry their crosses to the place of execution. We speak of migraine headaches or unruly kids as “our cross to bear.” Cross bearing isn’t the burdens we carry. What Jesus has in mind is a voluntary dying to self and living for God.

The presence of that little word “daily” makes all the difference. Jesus shifts the focus away from a once-for-all martyrdom to everyday sacrificial living. Following Jesus is a daily way of life that involves self-denial and sacrifice.

The cross has become a universal symbol of sacrifice. American soldiers who perform selfless acts of service to their country are awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. The French are given the Croix de Guerre, the British present the Victoria Cross and the Germans bestow the Iron Cross. “If any want to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily.”

Third, “If any want to become my followers, let them...follow me.” Jesus isn’t courting curiosity seekers. He seeks followers!

If you didn't get the memo about following Jesus, consider this sermon his invitation to follow him.

A disciple is a follower. Apprentice would be another name for follower. An apprentice is someone who spends time with another person to learn how to do what that person does. If you want to learn bricklaying, follow a bricklayer. If you want to learn the path of a Christian disciple, follow Jesus Christ.

Vienna Presbyterian aspires to become a disciple-making church. Our singular passion is becoming followers of Christ. Our great mission is inviting other people to become his followers as well.

If any want to become my disciples, let them (first) deny themselves and (second) take up their cross daily and (third) follow me.

Are you following Christ with your life? I mean, are you really following him? Maybe you are following the crowd and taking your social cues from your peers. Maybe you are following rules you have cobbled together for yourself. If truth be told, most of you are following you! Do you want to be in control or do you want what God has for you?

Perhaps you are following Christ, but there are areas of your life you are holding back for yourself. Here God, you can have this part of my life. You can have my life on Sunday morning but not my life Monday through Saturday. You can have my devotion in worship, but not my anger or resentment I carry with me through the week. If you didn't get the memo

about following Jesus, consider this sermon his invitation to follow him.

Who is Jesus? He is the Messiah. What is his mission? His mission is to die for our sins. And what does he direct us to do? He bids us to follow!

