

Mark 8:27-38

Peter Declares That Jesus Is the Messiah

²⁷ Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"²⁸ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

²⁹ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

³⁰ Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

8:31 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.

8:32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

8:33 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."

8:34 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.**

8:35 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.

8:36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

8:37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

8:38 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."

Proclamation of the Word

Last summer, we had dinner with Jim and Sally Richardson on their porch right outside the Montreat gate. All of a sudden we heard loud sirens- possibly EMS or rescue squad. Jim stopped and said, "Hope Billy is ok. Every time I hear a siren I wonder if they are going to get Billy Graham."

This week I don't know if the siren sounded, but the trumpet did, for Billy Graham, the evangelist, went home. Some say Montreat is heaven, especially for Presbyterians, but it is really just right outside the gate of heaven.

Many of us have been reflecting on this giant of a man who evangelized the world using every tool of the media to get the message out. After traveling the world and preaching to thousands, Billy would go home to his wife, his kids, his in-laws, Dr. and Mrs. Bell, retired Presbyterian missionaries to China, in a little nook in Montreat, NC. The man who followed Jesus to the ends of the earth took up

residence in a quiet cabin surrounded by hemlocks on that NC mountain. He has truly gone home now, well-done, good and faithful servant.

Maybe you remembered this week where you heard Billy Graham or listened to him on the radio and TV, or maybe that name is new to you. In some ways he was the first American celebrity preacher, but he would not want to be called a celebrity. Some may argue over his theology or his political missteps, but no one can argue over the man's integrity, love of God, and commitment to Jesus Christ.

In High School, I remember going to Williams-Brice Stadium in Columbia to a Billy Graham crusade with my Southern Baptist buddies. For this cool headed Presbyterian who had been nurtured by my church, I was drawn to the emotional experience of it. Billy Graham preached like nobody I had ever heard preach. And then the invitation to commit our lives to Christ came...

Without Jesus Christ, our lives are empty and without meaning. Do you know how to be saved???
Christ has done all the work on the cross. He rose again. He is alive, willing to forgive you, and to come into your heart and change you, willing to make you a new person...you have to repent of your sins and receive him as savior. And if you are willing to do that, you will have a faith to live by and a faith to die by. Jesus offered it all. He had it all. He gave it all. I'm asking you put your confidence and faith in him tonight, and he can change your life. I am asking you tonight to follow him, to serve him, to let him come in to your heart and forgive you. To start you in a new direction and receive him as Lord and Savior...tonight is the moment.

I had never heard anything like this. George Beverly Shea and the choir tuned up singing,

*Just as I am without one plea,
but that thy blood was shed for me.
And that Thou biddest me come to Thee,
Oh Lamb of God, I come, I come.*

Oh, and then the people came...hundreds, thousands maybe. I came...and 15 verses of "Just as I am" later, we had hands laid on us and prayers prayed over us. I had already committed my life to Christ at the First Presbyterian Church when I was confirmed so this was a recommitment, a renewal for me. When you come forward, a counselor meets with you, takes your contact information. A note went to my home church so that they could follow-up. And my name went on a mailing list for *Decision* magazine. The magazine was the way of helping one who made a decision to follow Jesus. *Decision* was an appropriate name for the magazine.

Today in our gospel reading Jesus asks the crowds for a decision, to pick a path, to choose to follow Jesus or not.

Notice that Peter gets it at first. Jesus tells about his passion to come, the truth that he will suffer, be rejected, killed, and raised again on the third day.

But in the same scene, Peter goes from potential Pope to *satan*. Now *satan* is a name which means "adversary." When Jesus calls Peter "satan" it in a general way, like we would call someone a liar or idiot or a ray of sunshine.

For instance, when I was little my brothers called me "motor mouth." It was descriptive. Little did we know their prophecy would be fulfilled, and I would be a preacher.

Names have meaning. Peter means Rock- as in the "rock on which Jesus will build his church." Jesus gives Peter a choice and presents him with a decision. He can be a rock for the church or an adversary. Peter is going to follow Jesus from behind one way or another. Peter has to decide which path he would choose? And which name he will be and who he will be.

But the real question is not who Peter is, it is who Jesus is. The anointed one, the Messiah, Peter says. He got it right. But later in the Garden of Gethsemane when Peter is asked if he knows Jesus, he denies Jesus 3 times saying, "I do not even know who he is." Peter spoke the truth. Even with what he knew of Jesus, he did not really know him.

Who is Jesus for us? for you? Do we really know?

Beyond all that we say he is, he is always beyond our grasp,
except for a glance at the hem of his garment.

We sometimes get close.

When we decide to follow Jesus, to let him be our leader, we make a commitment.

Maybe we make that commitment over and over again, even daily decide to follow Jesus. We choose to love him, to learn from him,

but we can only learn who he is by following him, by getting behind him.

We search for him in church, in the Scriptures, even from one another, and in God's mission in the world.

While going to the Billy Graham crusade made an impression on me, my church family was already showing me the way through countless people who took me under their wing, who modeled faithful steady discipleship, who made a commitment to live by the vows they made at baptisms for all children. They took me to sing Christmas Carols at the nursing home, opened the Scriptures to me, taught me to serve by asking me to help with Day Camp or Presbytery Youth Council, or to deliver our Christmas angel gifts. When my father died, Billy Graham did not show up, but Rev. Clay Doyle did, and the ladies from my Mom's Circle showed up with casseroles and flowers.

My mom knew she could not be the only model of faith for me. She felt so inadequate.

We needed the church family, so she made a decision to get me there.

Williams-Brice turned back into a stadium that night I went, but my church is still there. When I went home after Christmas this year, those steady saints, in it for the long haul, were there in worship on that Sunday morning- even on New Year's Eve. They were the ones I learned what following Jesus really looked like. You are the ones from whom I learn, from whom our children learn, all the children of the church. And when Hallie and Avery Conrad come back for a visit to Fort Hill after they are grown, you are the ones they will recall lived the faith, daily, weekly, steadily. This is the work not of just a one-time decision,

but an ongoing decision to get behind Jesus.

The Bronsons and the Rosses have presented themselves for active participation in this community of faith as members...we commit to help them in their faith journey. We need each other. We cannot be Christians alone, but only together. The Church is the Body of Christ on earth.

Today we ordain and install officers who will lead and nurture, serve and strengthen our church. Lots of decisions led to this point. In the Presbyterian Church we ordain people to roles that fulfill God's purpose in the church. The decision was made to nominate individuals with gifts for service. Those names came from you and your Nominating Committee. Some folks decided to answer, "yes, I am willing to serve." But that decision is an extension of many decisions before: to be baptized, to be active in the Church of Jesus Christ, to commit you life to walking in his footsteps.

Then the decision was made to elect these individuals. By training in theology and by learning how we are governed, by committing to prayer and study, again they presented themselves for service by being examined by the Ruling Elders, the session.

And then the Session decided to confirm that call upon their lives.

Today the session will ordain and install these new officers.

You will be asked to decide if you are willing to follow them as your leaders.

You will be asked to pray for them, encourage them, respect their decisions, and get behind them as we seek to serve Jesus Christ, who alone is head of the Church.

Lots of decisions have been made and will be made all so we can be a church who is behind Jesus, not lost and deceived, but keeping our eyes trained on Jesus.

In officer training we discussed the vows that are made here today. I shared that when my children were small and still growing, I always purchased their shoes a half size too big or bought clothes a size larger than they needed.

I knew they would grow and need something bigger than they actually were right now.

So these vows are big enough to grow into- expecting much, the work of a lifetime of discipleship in service to Christ and his church. It is a way these disciples are living out their baptism.

Conclusion

Friends, in our baptism we all get a new last name.

We all get a name that is bigger than we are, so we might grow into it.

Christian.

Remember what the suffix -ian means? "belonging to." So Christians are those belonging to Christ.

We profess, "I am not my own, but belong- body and soul, in life and in death- to my faithful Savior."

Not a satan, a Peter, a motor mouth, but a **Christian**, one who gets behind Jesus, who offers our lives in order to find them. That is our new name.

Jesus said, **"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.

Losing is finding and being found by the One who creates and calls us into loving relationship and service. We belong to God in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit does this work.

Today all of us are called to make a decision to commit to Christ- to serve him and one another, like Jesus humbly washing the feet of his disciples, in differing ways, not just as officers.

Billy Graham said, "When you hear that I have died, do not to believe a word of it. I will be more alive than I have ever been."

And that is the great paradox of faith:

it is in denying ourselves that we become our truest selves,

it is in losing that we are found,

it is in dying and living for Christ that we become fully alive, raised to new life!

....even on this side of the gates of heaven.