

The Question that Takes a Lifetime to Answer

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Mark 8:27-34

The father of a daughter with severe cognitive deficits wondered about her taking communion. Raised in a tradition that put more weight on the meaning of communion, than the mystery of communion, he agonized about what to do. But his daughter desperately wanted to take communion so he decided, "Why not?"

The next Sunday, the daughter went forward to the rail. Gratefully, she received the bread and the cup. For the first time, felt like she belonged.

But following the service, a busybody took the father aside and said, "Why did you let Sally take communion. Does she understand what it means?"

Face flushed with anger, the father shot back, "No, she doesn't fully understand what it means! Do *you*?!"

The story of Jesus' encounter with his disciples at Caesarea Philippi is a powerful reminder: a living faith in Jesus is not so much about having the right answers as getting on down the road with Jesus with your questions in tow.

Jesus picked a strategic spot to ask the all-important question, "Who do you say I am?" Caesarea Philippi was a Roman province on the southern slope of a nearly 10,000 foot peak,

Mount Hermon. Nearby was a shrine dedicated to the Greek god, Pan, drawn from the Greek pantheon of gods and goddesses.

A little farther up the mountain stood a regal temple to the Emperor Augustus. And Mount Hermon was the source of the Jordan, Israel's lifeline, evoking the long and storied history of the people of God. Thus, Caesarea Philippi projected the claims of imperial Rome and ancient Greece, and the story and faith of Jesus' own people.

There at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus first offers up an easy question, a question any pollster might ask: "Who do people say I am?"

The disciples are quick with an answer: "John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets." Jesus is placed in some very fine company. Whether in the pantheon of deities heralding Greece and Rome, or in the storied history of his own people, Jesus has claimed a spot.

But in response to the disciples' answer, Jesus doesn't say a word. Apparently, he is listening, hoping, for something more. And that's when he asks the question it takes a lifetime to answer. Peering intently at his disciples, seeing past their eyes and deep into their hearts, Jesus asks the intimately personal question, "But who do *you* say that I am?"

A pregnant silence follows as each disciple wonders what to say. Finally, Peter erupts in a gush of confidence and love: "You are the Messiah!"

Now over in Matthew's gospel, this is where the fireworks go off. This is where Jesus slaps Peter on the back and says, "Blessed are you, Simon, son of John. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven."

But in Mark, there is no response, just more silence. Maybe Jesus nods in acknowledgment. Maybe he feels a gear click in the great clock of God's providence. Maybe he decides Peter's confession means he is ready to take himself and his disciples to the next level. But all he says is "Don't breathe a word of this." Why not? Because, they don't yet understand enough about Jesus to unpack the meaning of their own confession.

And that's the part of the story I love. Peter's confession, "You are the Christ!" may be ill-formed and incomplete. But just orienting his life toward Jesus in this radically new way is enough. And even Peter's blunder that comes next in the story does not nullify his confession, because Peter has set the trajectory of his life: And it is to follow Jesus.

Which means for us, as for him, confessing Jesus as the Christ doesn't mean we fully grasp who Jesus is: No, confessing Jesus as the Christ means that amid the pantheon of gods, clamoring for your attention, you have committed your life to him.

And the miracle is Jesus is content to have you as you are. All he asks is that you tuck your questions neatly in your backpack, break camp, and follow him.

When I was in college, I had a friend who was a fundamentalist. And I don't use the term pejoratively. I mean he toed the line on the five points of classical fundamentalism: belief in the virgin birth, an inerrant bible, substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and a literal second coming.

But despite being what was called in those days, a "Bible beater," my friend had a big heart. And he could be a lot of fun, when he didn't take himself so seriously.

At the time, we were both studying the virgin birth in our New Testament theology class. And I was learning some stuff they never taught me in Sunday School, that virgin births were a common way of expressing divinity in ancient religions; and that while Matthew and Luke have virgin birth stories, Mark and John and Paul--who wrote most of the rest of the New Testament--never mention it. Nor does Jesus. So how can something that gets relatively little press in the New Testament, and *none* in the teachings of Jesus, be a condition of discipleship?

So one day, as my friend and I were chowing down on a burger at the local Quick Snack, I shared some of my musings about the virgin birth. He stopped mid-bite, arms frozen in place, glowered at me and growled, "If you don't believe in the virgin birth, you're not a Christian."

I was shocked. I felt like I had been slapped. I was just acknowledging some honest questions and for that, I'm consigned to hell?

Our friendship didn't survive that encounter. I had no interest in hobnobbing with folks who equated faith with having all the answers. And that's when I started looking for and hanging out with folks like one finds at Knollwood: fellow pilgrims in the way of Jesus, willing to be agnostic on some of the questions, while staying on the road with Jesus.

As the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, said it, "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. . . . Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

That has been my experience. Along the way in the struggle to know, love, and follow Jesus, I have lived my way into an answer, namely, that Jesus is the Christ, God's North Star, who points unerringly toward the beating heart of God. In fact, if you asked me today, what I think about the virgin birth, I would tell you: The problem with the virgin birth story is not what it tells us about the wonder of Jesus; the problem with the virgin birth is that no story, not even one so beloved and revered as this, can tell the half of Jesus' grace and glory!

Yes, as with most things in life, becoming a Christian is not so much about getting everything figured out as it is starting to move in the right direction. And the right direction is whatever you know and love and trust about Jesus. You learn as you go. Which is why it takes a lifetime to answer Jesus' deeply personal question: "Who do *you* say that I am?"

Granted, from time to time, we need a course correction. Clearly, Peter needed one, as he tried to talk Jesus down from being a suffering servant messiah. Peter, like most of us, wanted a triumphant messiah, a savior figure who could make his problems disappear. But Jesus was intent on living deeply into the world's suffering and pain so the life and love of God might be found, even there. That's why Jesus unloaded a painful rebuke on Peter, a warning probably meant as much for himself as for his earnest disciple: "Get behind me, Satan. For you are trying to force *God's way* of doing things into *your way* of doing things" "and God's way, is a cross."

Most of us have spent the weekend glued to our TVs and smart phones trying to anticipate Florence's path while hoping, praying, she would spare us--and the people and places we love--the full brunt of her fury. But that didn't keep tree limbs from falling on the house of one of our Sunday school teachers this morning, whom for obvious reasons, didn't make it to church.

More sad and tragic is the death of a mother and her baby in New Bern after a towering oak crashed into their house. Last I heard fourteen people have died due to Florence. A million more are without power as home and property damage is on the rise.

No, the God who draws near in Jesus does not alter storm paths to benefit us. But the God of suffering love was present in those selfless fire fighters who braved the storm to try to rescue that mother and her baby in New Bern. And when they could not, they gathered in the yard, and knelt in anguished prayer, beseeching God to bring new life and hope and healing on the far side, the Easter side, of the tragedy.

And the God of suffering love was present in all those first responders who risked their lives to rescue people who didn't evacuate when they had the chance.

And the God of suffering love will be present in the churches, relief organizations, and other faith groups who show up to start the rebuilding in the aftermath of the storm.

No, following Jesus is not about bending God's will to our will. Nor is it about getting the right answers to all the questions. Following Jesus is about--in his words "Denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following *me*."

So where do you feel the tug of God's Spirit or call in your own life? If you and Jesus met for coffee at Starbucks, what might he ask of you? If you were to head in the direction of your best hunch about what it means to follow Jesus, right here and right now, where would that be?

Go *there*. Head into whatever cries of suffering or need has your name on it and see if Jesus doesn't show up and meet you: in the calming sense of his presence, the hearty chuckle of his companionship, or in the pointed challenge of his truth.

Many years ago, a minister was seeking to determine a woman's fitness for membership in the Church of Scotland. Finally, exasperated at his theological grilling, the woman cried out, "Sir, I cannot answer all your hard questions. I only know I would gladly die for him!"

This is a proper Christian instinct: to follow Jesus in love and longing, even though our understanding is still very much a work in progress. As Carlyle Marney rightly said, the only question for admission into any church ought to be, "Are you willing to be a pilgrim?"

Maybe it's time you answered Jesus' question. Not forever, but for now: "Bobby, Sally, Charlie, Sue, who do *you* say that I am?"

And if you can answer, "You are the Christ, the one I promise to follow," you'll find Jesus showing up in a lot of surprising places, not least of which will be where you need him most.

And you will discover in the warp and woof of your own life, who he is.

Jesus, some of us have spent far too long trying to figure you out, and trying to figure ourselves out. But neither we, nor you, can be fully known apart from the journey of discipleship.

So starting where we are, draw us into a living relationship with you. May the momentum of your crucified and risen life get us moving. Then lead us ever deeper into the work of your kingdom and our life with God. Amen.