

Mark 8:27-38
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“Who are you? Who **are** you? Who are **you**?”

“Uh...uh...I hardly know sir,” replied Alice, “I changed so many times since this morning, you see.”

“I do *not* see,” replied Caterpillar, “explain yourself!”

“Why, I’m afraid I can’t explain myself, sir, because I’m not myself, you know.”

“I do *not* know.”

“Well, I can’t put it any more clearly because it isn’t clear to me.”

“You? Who aaaaaare you?” Caterpillar replies in a *who’s on first* farce that Alice can’t escape.

“Don’t you think you ought to tell me who you are, first,” she asks.

“Why?”

“Oh dear, everything is so confusing.”

“It is not.”

“Well, it is to me.”

That, of course, is a scene from the movie, *Alice in Wonderland*, when she meets the exac-a-tacly 3-inch high, chubby, hookah-smoking caterpillar. That was a favorite in our house and that line, “Who are you?” along with the Queen of Hearts query “Do you play croquet?” was an oft repeated line by my wife and daughters in particular.

So, who are you?

Do you remember when you first left home? A lot of young people are starting college this month, meeting roommates, having filled out forms identifying who they are: all their likes and dislikes, wondering about with whom they will be friends, if they will meet the love of their life—just around the next corner, or sitting in the cafeteria, or walking across the quad. Which is where I first spied the love of my life—walking across the quad toward me with a bunch of other girls, and I wondered “who is that?” I had to find out who *she* was. Thirty-nine years later we are still discovering each other. But I find it astounding that not only are those school days long gone for us, but also for the same children of our house who used to watch *Alice in Wonderland* in their footie pajamas in our family room.

But in thinking back about those years when you first left home, whether it was for college or the Military, or work, you encountered a lot of new people. And when you did, what was the first question you were asked? “Where are you from?” Where I went to college in Washington State it was important to know who the fellow Coloradans were, because we might need someone to carpool home with at Christmas; and it was important to know who was from right there in Spokane, because they knew all the local hangouts; and if someone said they were from some foreign place like New Jersey or Florida, one wondered what brought them all the way to the Pacific Northwest. But then I went to New Jersey to seminary and everyone was from somewhere *else*, so I noticed that the first questions were no longer “where are you from?” but instead it became “Where did you do your undergrad? Whatever question was asked, they were all questions trying to get at the real question, “Who are you?” And is there a more important question than that?

Who are you? In Mark's gospel, that has really been the question up until this point. All through the stories of healings and teachings there is a bit of a mystery about Jesus from the disciple's point of view. They want to know who this guy is. He has some charisma about him and so they begin to

follow him. He teaches in a way that is different than they have ever heard before. He heals people but asks that it be kept a secret. When they are out in a boat and a storm begins to swamp them, he rebukes the wind and calms the sea and they ask themselves straight out, “*Who, then, is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?*” Then this reading comes at the very midpoint of Mark’s gospel and as Mark tells his story, the disciples are just discovering with whom it is they are walking. It is the apex of the Gospel and anticipates a sea change because it is time to be clear about just who this Jesus is and what that means to those around him and the world.

So, imagine with me, in the region of Caesarea Philippi, a beautiful area in the Golan Heights in the northern part of Galilee in present-day Israel, when they are just walking along, far away from the crowds. Jesus asks, “Who do people say that I am?” Someone replies, “Well, there’s a rumor going around that you are John the Baptist come back from the dead. Isn’t that crazy?” Then someone else said, “There are some others who say that you are Elijah, or one of the other prophets.” I imagine they all chuckle a bit at the creativity of rumors and gossip. Then, when it was silent again, Jesus said, “Well, okay, but who do *you* think I am?” Again, in my mind, I imagine that they had been walking along and they all stopped and looked at each other. Maybe some looked at the ground in their discomfort. But, I imagine, the directness of the question destabilizes them and none of them would look at Jesus.

It’s all been leading up to this. All the miracles, all the teaching, all the healings, all the walks through the countryside, all leading to this point. *Who is he?* There’s silence.

Until Peter, of course Peter, finally answers him. “You are the Christ. You are the Messiah. You are the one we’ve been waiting for.” Peter looked around and found the others nodding. Jesus smiled in

approval but told them that they should keep it quiet for now; it wasn't yet time to announce this to the world.

But they didn't understand that, why *wouldn't* they tell people? There was so much that they didn't understand. Sometimes I wonder whether we understand any better than the disciples. Who is Jesus? Can **you** readily answer that question? And notice, that Jesus doesn't ask them, "So who am I?" It's not an academic question. You're a carpenter's son from Nazareth who preaches really well and can heal people. The question is "Who do you say that I am?"

Who is this Jesus to you? Is he the Christ? The son of God? Is he a good teacher? Is he fire insurance to save you from some hell that you hope really doesn't exist? Is he your hope for healing, or the healing of someone you love? *Who he is*, is a question that dominated the church in the early years of its existence. And it is still the question that dominates the church today. Early on, before the Christian church had a real standard of belief, it had a wide variety of people who all called themselves Christian though they understood Christ in very different ways. Then, after several centuries which saw the cropping up of different Christian faith groups, the Roman Emperor, Constantine, called all the bishops together at a place called Nicea and told them to come up with something concrete to say about who this Jesus was. So they met many times and hashed things out—and tossed a few people out—and the creed that we say today on this second Sunday of the month, the Nicene Creed, is the result of all those meetings. This is who we think Jesus is. We think.

Each of us has our own ideas of who Jesus is and this is because Jesus comes to each of us in our own way, and the Jesus I know may be a bit different from the Jesus you know, because he walks with you

on your path and he walks with me on mine. It is why we have to keep asking anew: *Who is Jesus?*

The hint of an answer you get right now might be quite different than the one you get tomorrow or next year. It is an ever-evolving quest to get to know Jesus and it is only when we are sure—in all our imperfection—that we’ve figured it out and figured him out, that we get mired in intractable and self-justifying positions that divide us as people.

And because we are in relationship to Jesus, the follow-up question is: *Who am I?*

And because, as Christians, we are not isolated but rather live in community we might also ask: *Who are we?*

Today, when you go out to Church Fest and see all the tables and displays, you’ll ask yourself, “is this me? Singing in the choir? Helping with Mission? Making meals for youth?” And as you walk through the house and around the grounds, ask yourself, “What shall we use this for that’s really us?

Classrooms? Housing refugees? A non-profit that advocates for climate change policy? A museum?”

What would be us? Who are we?

What would you like to see there because when you walk by you’ll say . . .

That's who **we** are...