

**“Winners and Losers”**  
**Rev. Emily Wilmarth, First Presbyterian Church of Highlands, NC**  
**Sunday, September 16, 2018**  
**Mark 8:27-38**

*Who do you say that I am?*

I can imagine Peter is just dying for Jesus to ask him. He’s dying to answer the question right, because Peter knows. Jesus is no John the Baptist, no prophet of old, he is the *Messiah*. The *Christ*. The one who will redeem Israel. The one who will overthrow Rome.

Who can blame Peter? After all, John the Baptist himself claimed that Jesus was coming and would be more powerful than he. Jesus told people, “The kingdom of God has come near.” And if that weren’t enough, there’s proof. Jesus possesses power like Peter’s never seen before. Power to cure illness with the touch of a hand. Power to drive out demons. Power to turn dinner for twelve into a feast for thousands. Power to stand up and speak God’s truth to the scribes and Pharisees. Power to change lives.

Peter knows that Jesus is the promised one, the one the prophets proclaimed, the one sent by God to restore God’s holy reign on earth.

*You are the Messiah*, he proclaims.

And he is right. Jesus is the Messiah - we know that. The trouble lies, as the rest of the scene reveals, in Peter’s vision (version?) of the Messiah. The trouble is, the Messiah Peter proclaims is not the Messiah asking Peter the question.

*Who do you say that I am?*

Jesus tells them who he is. He is the Son of Man, the one who will undergo great suffering, who will die at the hands of the ones in power in Jerusalem.

Peter wants none of it. He rebukes Jesus. If you were here last Sunday, you heard Curtis talk about rebuking. Rebuking is not calm disagreement. Peter doesn’t say, “Now Jesus, I have a bone to pick here.” Peter takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. Let’s him have it. There is real anger.

And as hard as I believe it is for any of us to imagine squaring up to Jesus, you just can’t blame Peter. Because Peter, like every one of us, has a strong conviction about who Jesus is. Peter has put his faith, his hope, in this Messiah. He has given his entire life to following Jesus, who he believes will redeem Israel. But who Peter says Jesus is, and who Jesus *really* is, might not be the same person.

Who do you say Jesus is? in our women's bible study this week, we heard a great series of identities we place on Jesus. There's the Prozac Jesus, who makes us feel better; the Vacation Planner Jesus, who takes us to a place where life is better; the District Attorney Jesus, who gets all those people who make our lives hard; the match.com Jesus, who gives us someone to love; the Neiman Marcus Jesus, who delivers all our golden dreams.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, we scoff at these images, these identities, placed on Jesus. We know that Jesus isn't any one of these singular identities. We even, I think, have an inkling that Jesus is none of these identities. And we know we can't contain the full mystery of true Messiah. We know human words cannot describe the Divine.

But, we easily fall into the trap of trying to fit Jesus into the identity we want for him to satisfy our desires, to respond to our emotions, to fit into the boxes we need him to fit into to make sense of our lives. Which begs the question: are we seeing ourselves in Jesus or seeing Jesus in ourselves? Without wanting to, or trying to, we snip away at Jesus's true identity as the Messiah, honing him and his power to the image we need him to fill in our own lives. In this way, Jesus ends up looking a lot like us. He becomes a reflection of our own values and beliefs, contained in an image we can understand and even control. In so many ways, who we say Jesus is depends on who we are.

You may have heard of the scholar and author, Kate Bowler, a professor of Christian history at Duke Divinity School. She spent a decade researching North American faith communities that proclaim the prosperity gospel, the belief that God wants to bless us with good things and that it's up to us to earn that blessing. Bowler sought to understand the theological framework and lives of the people who adhere to this form of Christianity.

Just a few years ago, Bowler was diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer, a diagnosis that she, her husband, and their toddler took hard, as you can imagine. Through that diagnosis, she came to realize that she was not so different from the people she was researching in her academic field. Faced with the hardest, most painful reality of her mortality and illness, she came to see that her own theology, her own belief about God, was rooted in a similar vein of the prosperity gospel. She says, "I thought somewhere in there that being a really good Christian might give me other outcomes than other people - 'Maybe I'm the exception to the rule that bad things can happen to other people.'"<sup>2</sup>

It was a personal come-to-Jesus moment. A moment to realize that despite thinking she hadn't, she actually had shaped her own identity for Jesus, her own reality based on the desire to live a healthy, happy life. Her new memoir is called *Everything Happens for a Reason And Other Lies I've Loved*.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul David Tripp, *New Morning Mercies; A Daily Gospel Devotional* (Crossway: Wheaton, IL).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theblaze.com/news/2018/06/07/incurable-cancer-transformed-this-duke-professors-faith>

I doubt most of us are much different than Bowler. We don't want to suffer, or to see the ones we love suffer. And so we try to live our best lives, believing somewhere deep down that we will be rewarded by God with good fortune and good health. In doing so, we make God into someone we want, someone we need God to be.

The question, "Who do you say that I am?" is more than a question about defining who Jesus is. It's also about identifying who we are. Who do you say that you are? Who do I say that I am?

I am a pastor. A wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister. I am not a runner, but I am a jogger and a swimmer. I am a lover of chocolate, peanut butter, novels, sunny days, and my cat, Mouser. I am a cradle Presbyterian - a member of this denomination for my whole life. And I am a fan of the Philadelphia Eagles, but not a diehard.

We all have ways we identify ourselves. And those identities come with definitions based on experience, background, culture, theology, and politics, to name a few. Our identities help us fit into one group or another. And they make us stand out as unique, too.

There are so many identities we take on (or try to take on) in order to either fit in or stand out. There are things we do, ways we live, in an attempt to meet a standard we or someone else has set for us. *This* is what a good Christian looks like. *This* is how you behave in a marriage. *This* is what a great grandparent does. *This* is who you must be to win an election, to be a leader in your community, to rise above the rest. *This* is how to dress, what to drive, where to live, how to vote, what to think. We adopt these standards and claim them as our own identities, whether we're aware of it or not.

It's not that the identities are necessarily "bad" or "good," or that they lead us to necessarily "bad" or "good" choices. Sometimes the right identity can lead us to do great things. I want to be a good mom, not just so people will say I'm a good mom, but because I want the best for Clara.

But our identities, our very human identities, can also determine our choices for us. They determine a script or a role we play. Is this really good a good parenting choice, or is this just what a "good Mom" does? When we take on certain identities, we don't always truly consider what is right or wrong or fair and just. Our moral decisions are made for us when we try to live according to the questions, "What do people with this identity do? How do people in this group to which I belong behave?"

When Peter rebukes Jesus, it is because Jesus is not playing the Messiah role Peter has assigned him, the role Peter needs him to play. And, in turn, Jesus rebukes Peter for trying to put a human identity, a box, around him, defining what he must do, who he must be. "For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

When Jesus says, “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,” maybe what he is saying is that we must lose the identities we allow to define us. Not that we stop being who we are - moms or dads, daughters or sons, Christians, friends. But that we open ourselves to the question, “is there a better way?” And We stop letting those identities decide how we live and the choices we make.

In many ways, our human identities get in the way of who God creates us to be. They cloud the image of God in us. And only when we lose all the others, can we save the very lives God intends for us to live. Lives lived for the sake of God’s reign. For the sake of Jesus Christ. Only when we deny the identities we take on for ourselves and embrace the identity God gives us can we truly follow Jesus.

Retired pro basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar has wrestled with his own sense of identity. In a recent op-ed he describes the experience of aging out of professional sports.<sup>3</sup> He talks about the difficult transition from fame, fortune, public praise, self-pride, and being in top physical form to retirement. Some professional athletes - shooting stars, he calls them - burn out quickly. But others, like him, manage to stay in the game much longer. And when their bodies force the issue, when they must hang up their jerseys, they’re left with a question, “Who am I now?”

They were once “kings,” he writes. Children idolized them. Fans hung on to their every word. Many like him were heroes in their ethnic communities. “We weren’t just successful,” he says, “We were significant.”

And then, the spotlight dims if not disappears. And the question remains, “Who am I now?”

I am sure that, for many, transitions like this (retirement, change of status) can feel like a crisis. The unknown of the future can feel like stepping into an abyss. But really, it is a opportunity that might only come rarely in one’s lifetime.

Abul-Jabbar argues that while many famous athletes manage to turn their past success into a present financial boon, opening franchises, becoming sports anchors or coaches, those successes shouldn’t be an end goal. “We have the opportunity to use our celebrity to reshape society rather than just entertain it,” he says. He suggests speaking out for social causes that matter. “...speaking out and lending your name or presence to social causes you believe in doesn’t diminish your celebrity,” he says, “but rather gives it meaning because now your name isn’t only related to how well you handled a ball, a bat, or a stick, but how committed you are to a community.”

Losing the identity of professional or celebrity athlete doesn’t have to mean losing everything. Rather, it can mean gaining the unique opportunity to make a difference. He writes, “If we tap

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2018/sep/13/when-athletes-retire-we-face-the-most-difficult-question-who-are-we?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2018/sep/13/when-athletes-retire-we-face-the-most-difficult-question-who-are-we?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other)

into the energy and commitment in our souls, we can invigorate ourselves, inspire others, and improve the world we all live in. Then we are more than great athletes, we are worthy human beings."

I think we come to an understanding of our true identity in God in the ways we use what we have to serve others. To be worthy human beings. Kevin and I were watching hurricane coverage over the weekend, and we saw an interview with three teenage boys. These guys had spent all day Friday on their boat, rescuing over 50 stranded people. Before you jump to "their mothers must have been so proud", they did choose to conduct their national TV news interview shirtless. These boys saw a need. They had the gifts of a boat and youthful energy.

We don't have to be teenage boys saving lives in a hurricane to be worthy human beings, doing the work for God's reign here on earth. But each possesses gifts, tools, instruments to use to serve God by serving others. We find what we have, and who we are, deep in our hearts, in the energy and commitment of our souls. And our faith.

Ultimately, it's who we are and what we do with our lives that answers Jesus's question: "Who do you say that I am?"