

I Believe I Am So Called

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Readings

Proverbs 1:20–33; Psalm 19; James 3:1–12; Mark 8:27–38

Who Do People Say That I Am?

Growing up in a small town, I always found it disconcerting when someone would say to me, “We were just talking about you!” It seemed odd to me that people would talk about me when I wasn’t there. On the one hand, I didn’t think I was interesting enough to warrant comment and on the other hand, if people are talking about you, without you, in a small town it is very seldom a compliment. Years later, when I was trying to figure out my sense of vocation to priestly ministry, many people tried to be helpful and offered their observations about my suitability for priesthood. I was sharing some of their observations with a mentor of mine, who offered a helpful piece of advice: It’s important to know what other people see in you because sometimes they see things that you’ll miss; it’s also important to remember that sometimes people see in you what they’re projecting on to you, and it might not be as real as they think it is. Discerning our calling in this life, whether it’s to ordination or marriage or celibacy or parenthood or a host of professions and roles, is an important part of Christian life.

When Jesus asks the disciples “Who do people say that I am?” he knows that he’s going to get a wild range of observations and opinions. Especially in Mark’s telling of the gospel, where Jesus is working hard to keep his true identity secret much of the time. (This is not a very successful project for Jesus, as we saw last week, but he does try.) It’s important for Jesus to know what people are saying when he’s not around for a few reasons. He probably wants to know what kinds of impressions he is making on the population, with both those who are interested and those who are threatened by his ministry. In the case of the Markan Jesus, he almost certainly wants to know whether he’s managing to keep his secret. He also probably wants to know what kinds of hopes or fears people are projecting on to him and his ministry. And, as we see when he follows up, Jesus also wants to know what the disciples are thinking and saying about him.

When Jesus explains to the disciples some of what his future will hold, they are understandably upset. None of us like hearing that a friend and teacher is going to suffer and die, even if there is a promise of resurrection at the end. Jesus has explained that all of this, grim thought it may be, is necessary. Peter goes so far as to pull him aside and tries to correct Jesus, telling him this cannot be so. This matches well with Peter’s headstrong personality and his great love for Jesus. But it also matches well with Peter’s need for Jesus and his fear at losing this friend and teacher who has made such a difference in his life. Weighing how much of Peter’s concern about Jesus’s vocation is for Jesus and how much of it is for himself is a question worth considering here.

Deliver Us Not Into Temptation

Luke 22:42 Jesus rebukes Peter harshly, labeling him in that moment as the great adversary, the tempter. Peter has named, out loud, the struggle that Jesus is having internally. We know that Jesus is conflicted over his future suffering and death and, until his last hours, prays for another way that his great work might be accomplished. Jesus may have even hoped, in the moment when he revealed this future to his disciples, that he had settled his misgivings, only to have one of his closest friends speak them all out loud for him to wrestle with again. It's so startling when someone else says to us exactly what we were thinking, whether happily or not, as though they've had a momentary look into our deepest thoughts.

Jesus also hears Peter's concern for himself. Often, in crowds with a common purpose, if one person shares a question or concern, there are several others thinking it. When Jesus turns to address the crowd and clarify for them what being a follower of his entails, he is addressing both Peter's concerns and all of those who share them. The list of what being a follower of Jesus involves is startlingly clear and honest. It was the calling of a follower of Christ in the first century and it remains a good summary of Christian life today: Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Jesus.

Mark 1:12-13 By the time we get this list of three points, we've already seen the first one demonstrated. Jesus has been tempted in the desert and denied himself. He has put aside his own very human desires for food and power and glory because they do not serve the greater, common good. He could have all of those things and more, but they would be self-serving. In today's passage we have seen Jesus not only resist the temptation to take things for himself that he wants but does not have, but also resist the temptation to put aside things he has and does not want. Jesus has resisted the temptation to avoid his future of suffering and death. He has taken that on knowing that his suffering and death are the path of greatest love for all of us. In denying this last temptation, to avoid suffering and death, Jesus has also shown us what it means to take up our crosses.

What Wondrous Love is This?

To take up our cross is to accept and live with the parts of a vocation that we don't much like. These crosses are often costly sacrifices in the name of a greater good. In the case of Jesus, his vocation is to be the ultimate sign of God's love for humanity and, to do that, he will have to suffer and die. A palliative care worker experiences the death of the people they care for over and over again. That's a cross to bear. Parents give up freedom and much of their self-interest for the sake of their children's wellbeing. That's a cross to bear. Every vocation, including the vocation of life as a Christian, comes with a cross to bear. A cost that we pay, willingly, because we believe the vocation is worth it.

Mark 15:21 We are each called to carry our cross, but we are not called to carry it always alone. When Jesus is carrying his own cross, literally, and he simply cannot take it any farther, a passer-by is compelled to help him. St Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus. Simon follows Jesus, all along the Way of the Cross, up to Golgotha where he will see this carpenter's son crucified. Simon did not stop to watch the procession with intention of becoming involved, but when he was called by one of the soldiers, he took up the cross without protest and carried it the rest of the way. We don't have record of why Simon was chosen; perhaps he showed some sign of sympathy for Jesus. And, other than his sons who are remembered as disciples of Jesus, we don't know what Simon felt about the experience afterward. If he and his family were indeed connected to Jesus, I am sure he spent many hours on Good Friday and after, wondering about his part in the crucifixion, until he heard the good news of the Resurrection. No small sacrifice at all, to think you might have aided in the murder of the Messiah. Simon probably spent his own hard hours in a personal Gethsemane. Jesus asks nothing of us that he has not done for us first.

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This conversation between Jesus and the disciples about what it means to live out a vocation is serious stuff. Jesus finally reveals to the disciples what his vocation will entail. The disciples are terribly upset by it. There's a conflict with Peter that prompts Jesus to explain to the whole crowd what this is all about and he doesn't leave any room for half-measures. If someone is going to be a disciple of Jesus they must deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow him.

Jesus still calls people to follow him. That's why we're all here this morning. At some point, somehow, Jesus called each of us to himself and called us to follow where he leads. Some of us first heard the call a long time ago. Some of us heard it more recently. Some of us might be hearing it clearly for the first time or in a new way this very morning. When he sense that call, a pull toward Jesus, we're not always sure what to make of it. Like the disciples, we're often a bit confused and frequently head off in the wrong direction, looking for answers. Sometimes clearer answers, sometimes easier answers. Eventually, we make our way back to the path Jesus is walking and then we do it all over again.

This Christian life is a vocation, you know. We don't often use that word in relation to the everyday life of Christians. Usually when we hear "vocation" in church, someone's talking about a sense of call to ordained ministry. Maybe to religious life in a monastic community. Very rarely we might hear it used to mean a call to baptism or confirmation. I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of times I've heard vocation used to describe the sense of call to marriage. Or to parenthood. Or to the work of teachers, nurses, builders, artists, and the many other professions that Christians take up. And that's a shame. When we are trying to puzzle out those big decisions, as followers of Jesus, Christians, "little Christs", we should always be asking God and praying about how we are called to live this Christian life. How am I called to walk the path of Jesus?

Being a priest isn't a job, it's one way of living as a Christian. Being a monk or nun isn't a job, it's one way of living as a Christian. Being married isn't only about butterflies and romance, it's one way for two people to live together as Christians. Being celibate isn't a state where we push people with sexualities we don't understand or the catch-all for people who just weren't lucky enough to find that magical, special partner, it's a way—a very holy way, according to the Bible—of living as a Christian. Being a teacher isn't just a job that pays the rent, it's a way—a very dangerous way, according to the Letter of James—of living as a Christian. Being baptized isn't an excuse for a party and it isn't fire insurance that we take on just in case, it is a commitment to live every minute of every day as a Christian, doing everything in power to listen for the calling of Jesus and follow where he leads.

You can see the pattern forming here. For those of us who have died and been reborn in the living water of the font, the questions we must ask ourselves constantly are "How am I called to be like Christ in this situation? Which path before me is the one that follows Jesus most closely?" If we ask ourselves these questions and are honest about the answers, we will find that we are frequently called to deny ourselves and take up our crosses. Following Christ often means making a choice that is more difficult, more costly for us but which benefits the common good.

For centuries, this commitment to the common good instead of personal gain was a distinguishing feature of Christians. It made us suspicious in the ancient Mediterranean world, this self-sacrificing nature for the sake of others. Even for others who weren't like us and didn't share our faith. I am reminded of the story of a woman who arrives at the door of a church one evening, in dire need of safe shelter. She is hesitant to come in when invited and says to the person at the door, "Do I need to become a Christian to be safe here?" The person at the door shakes their head and says, "No. We need to be Christians so you can be safe here."

If we Christians live in the way Jesus calls us, people will talk about us when we're not around. They will tell stories about what makes us different from others. Some will be suspicious. Some will come to us for safety. Whether they like it or not, all will see Jesus leading us, calling to onlookers in the crowd, and stooping to carry our crosses when they become too heavy for us. Do you believe you are so called?