

*Who am I?*  
Mark 8: 27-38

One of my all-time favorite television shows was M\*A\*S\*H. With its unique wit, oft times not-so-subtle satire, and probing messages, it provided not only entertainment but much to consider about life and who we are as a society. In one particular episode Hawkeye had been placed on house arrest, something that was the source of much glee for Major Frank Burns. When the tables were turned and Burns was placed on tent confinement, Hawkeye took inordinate pleasure in the reversed fortunes. Standing at the threshold of the tent, he swung the door back and forth jumping from the freedom of the outdoors to the imprisonment of their quarters. 'I can come in, I can go out,' he snickered as Frank sulked. In the quiet background was a set of simple hinges, pivoting with each swing of the door. Small, virtually unnoticeable, not even featured in the scene, those hinges were momentous. On one side was light and freedom, on the other trapped darkness. Hinges provide dual views. Whether it be independence and restriction as portrayed in M\*A\*S\*H or a conversation between Jesus and his disciples, hinges mark transitions, a change from one setting to another, a call to make a decision about what direction to follow.

This conversation between Jesus and his disciples at Caesarea Philippi proved to be the hinge for his ministry, for his identity as Messiah, and for the disciples as they began to realize what it meant to follow Jesus. "Who do people say that I am?"<sup>1</sup> A relatively safe, intellectual question that was actually a continuation of the speculation that surrounded Jesus' identity. Jesus was John the Baptist, who had been brutally murdered by Herod; Jesus was Elijah, the greatest of all prophets who was taken into heaven and would someday return; Jesus was another one of the prophets of God. Then Jesus turned the tables and pointed what was a rather esoteric discussion directly to their hearts. "But who do *you* say that I am?"<sup>2</sup> Peter spoke

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 8: 27b NRSV

<sup>2</sup> Mark 8: 29b NRSV (italics added)

up quickly. "You are the Messiah."<sup>3</sup> Yet even that bold statement linking Jesus with the long-awaited Messiah was an evasive answer for there were many views of Messiah. Messiah was seen by some to be an earthly king who would restore Israel to what was perceived to be its former glory. Messiah was an other-worldly figure who would come to judge the world, separating the righteous from the unrighteous, rewarding the faithful and condemning those who had strayed. Perhaps Messiah was a teacher and healer, one who would bring comfort to a beaten-down people. Or maybe Messiah was something altogether different. For Peter to affirm Jesus as Messiah was brave, even dangerous, but it did not really answer the question. "But who do *you* say that I am?"

After Peter's assertion, Jesus once more curved the conversation in a shocking and most disturbing direction. "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."<sup>4</sup> If the disciples had not yet fully understood the implications of Jesus' daring ministry and following him, that statement put it right before them. And Peter - of course, it was Peter once more - objected. Can't you hear him? 'Hey, Jesus, don't say anything like that. We have so many followers now, and with that kind of talk, we could lose some folks. We have done so much good for people. Why would we want to say things that would only discourage them and maybe even drive them away?' And Jesus called him Satan, Satana, meaning adversary, one who plots against another. If that were not far enough out on the plank of certain doom, Jesus stepped further out on the path of no return. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."<sup>5</sup> Who is this Jesus who would so blatantly speak of a cross, a horrible torture device reserved for the worst of criminals, of death? Who is Jesus?

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 8: 29c NRSV

<sup>4</sup> Mark 8: 31 NRSV

<sup>5</sup> Mark 8: 34b NRSV

At some point, we all have to decide who Jesus is and how we will respond based on that identity. Is Jesus just a really good guy who did some pretty amazing things? Like the Messiah who was to lead the people of Israel to certain victory over all their oppressors, it makes for a great story. Why, we could spend week after week retelling the marvelous stories of Jesus! Or the other Messiah, the one who would come to judge the world, who would condemn evil and reward good, placing us in power. Now that is also quite appealing, because everything is laid out so neatly and clearly - and we are on the side of the winner once again. That is what Church has become - the victor over all things evil, the judge and holder of all that is good and right, the one who decides who is in and who is out. But that is not Messiah, that was never meant to be the Church, and it is most assuredly not the way of the cross of which Jesus spoke. Peter did not get the Messiah he wanted. None of the disciples did. When we hear these stark words of Jesus from Mark's gospel, we find ourselves questioning whether that is even the God we want! A God who expects us to carry a cross, to lose our hard-earned place in society, to die? No, that is not what we bargained for.

But there's more to the story. Peter did not even seem to hear 'after three days rise again'. He was so focused on what he perceived to be the negative he failed to hear that beyond the cross, beyond death in whatever form that might take, there was resurrection and new life. A life in which we discover the cascading waterfall of God's love pouring over us all. A life in which God's grace will take the most broken and wounded of people and situations and create a healing wholeness. A life in which we, the Church, become that for others as well. That is the way of the cross. That is our life.

At this point in Mark's gospel, which is about halfway, Messiah has been almost an abstract, intellectual concept. Jesus' question, 'Who do you say that I am?' and Peter's answer, 'You are the Messiah' guide us along a path of transformational faith to a God that is very real, very tangible, very personal. It is a question with which we grapple on our own and as a community of faith. Who is Jesus? That is the first and most crucial question for us all. Our

answer leads to how we will respond, how we will live. That is Jesus' challenge and invitation here - to get over ourselves and what we think we will get out of a relationship with God and look to the needs of a hurting world, to let ourselves and others be well and deeply loved, to dare to discover the possibilities of new life by freely loving and serving. That new life is there for us - if we decide to pick up our cross and follow.

No one wants a cross, no one wants to die. According to Jesus, though, that is exactly why we are here. Not exactly a sermon of comfort, is it? I want to preach about the beauty and joy of God's love for us all, about the ultimate hope that shapes our faith and living, about the limitless possibilities of who we can be by the grace of God. Oh, how I want to! And I will because that is our ultimate goal - to be God's beloved community. But there are reminders all the time the way to that can be more like that of which Jesus spoke - rejection, struggles, maybe even death. At some point we have to each ask ourselves the question, who is Jesus for me? Who is Jesus for us as a community of faith? Then we make a decision and follow.

Since the Sandy Hook massacre in 2012 there has been at least 239 school shootings, an average of five per month.<sup>6</sup> That figure does not include the slaughter at the Pulse Night Club in Orlando, the horror at a concert in Las Vegas, the murders in Sutherland Springs, Texas and Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, and so many, too many, others. It is both mind-boggling and mind-numbing. Even more astounding are the empty words that follow, the 'thoughts and prayers' that used to be such a source of comfort but now ring hollow in the wake of the ensuing callous inaction and paralysis. They represent a faith that has chosen to stand still and inactive rather than take up the cross and follow. It's a complicated problem with causes and reasons that are tightly snarled in the very fabric of our existence as a culture. What is clear is that 'thoughts and prayers', once a symbol of a caring faith, has become a joke, a source for derision and ridicule. It's time, way past time, to take up the cross and follow.

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<sup>6</sup> Jugal K. Patel. "After Sandy Hook More than 400 People Have Been Shot in Over 200 School Shootings." *New York Times*. February 15, 2018.

When I was working as a therapist, I used this poem to illustrate the need for the client to consciously choose another path, to venture into the unknown if there was truly to be a new beginning:

**Chapter I**

I walk down the street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk  
I fall in.  
I am lost ... I am helpless.  
It isn't my fault.  
It takes forever to find a way out.

**Chapter II**

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I pretend I don't see it.  
I fall in again.  
I can't believe I am in the same place.  
But, it isn't my fault.  
It still takes a long time to get out.

**Chapter III**

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I see it is there.  
I still fall in ... it's a habit ... but,  
my eyes are open.  
I know where I am.  
It is my fault.  
I get out immediately.

**Chapter IV**

I walk down the same street.  
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.  
I walk around it.

**Chapter V**

I walk down another street.<sup>7</sup>

We need to walk down another street. We need to reclaim the faith we profess and make it come alive. Whether it be advocating for wise legislation, voting for candidates whose souls have not been consumed by money, non-violent protest marches, expressing our thoughts to political representatives, or learning to tangibly support in times of tragedy, we must take up a cross and follow the God of justice, grace, and love. Our current path is not leading us to God's

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<sup>7</sup> Portia Nelson. *There's A Hole in My Sidewalk: An autobiography in five short chapters.*  
<http://mymeditativemoments.com/realization-for-change/>

beloved community. When we as a society fail to protect the most vulnerable among us, we are not following the cross and we have no idea who Jesus is.

Maybe your cross will not be guns. Perhaps your road of faith goes along another journey. But the way of the cross, the way of faith, is always grounded in the love of God, and it is a way of action, of letting God's love and grace transform the world through our living. The way of the cross is not one that sits idly by sending vapid 'thoughts and prayers' while injustice continues to trample the lives of the innocent, the poor, the weak, the vulnerable. In the movie *All Saints*, which we showed a few weeks ago, a neophyte Anglican priest had been sent to close down a struggling congregation. Though a group of refugees had added to their numbers, his orders remained the same. As he went over in his mind what would happen to all the people, he rationalized that God would take care of them, that God would provide help. His wife pointedly asked him, "Aren't *you* God's help?" That is the way of the cross - to be God's help. Despite bureaucracy, despite politics and presidents, maybe even despite the church as it has become, we are God's presence in the world. That is who Jesus was and is; that is who we are to be. Where is your hinge? Where is the cross that calls you to follow? It's a decision we each must make for ourselves and together as a people of faith. As the ones who dream of God's beloved community, that is who we are to be.

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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Mark 8: 34b - 36 NRSV