

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

THE CRUX OF IDENTITY

Mark 8:27-38

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

27Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" 28And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." 30And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

31Then 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. 32He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 33But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

34He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 35For 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. 36For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? 37Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

38Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

DIAGNOSIS: Identity Crisis

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Who Am I?*

One might get the impression that Jesus is fishing for information when he asks, “Who do people say that I am?” (v. 27). And, even if (as we assume) Jesus is clear in his own mind about who he is, it seems he’s interested to hear about others’ impressions of him. Aren’t we all? We want to know what others think about us, and—more often than not—we hinge our worth on those others’ assessment. So does Jesus’ identity depend on him, or does it depend on others? And does our identity come from the inside or from the outside? Who determines my identity: You or me?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Who Is He?*

The “you and me” in Jesus’ case is one and the same: God determines Jesus’ identity, and Jesus is God. So the question Jesus asks is not really about how he identifies himself; it’s about how his disciples assess him, hence he asks: “But who do you say that I am?” (v. 29). And this is where things get sticky, because a disciple’s assessment of his master determines how that disciple will follow the master. So, when Peter answers Jesus, “You are the Messiah,” it would seem that Peter is on the right track. It appears so, that is, until Peter reveals his ignorance of what that messiahship will involve—namely, suffering and rejection (v. 31). Then Peter tries to get ahead of Jesus, and Jesus is forced to put him in his place: “Get behind me,” he says (v. 33). And, if we are ready to point the

finger at Peter's faithless ignorance, we'd better think twice: Each one of us is regularly trying to get ahead of Jesus, making him who we want him to be, rather than following him in all his suffering and glory.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Who Are We?*

But here's the real hitch: This failure of ours to follow Jesus—this penchant we have to “get ahead” of Jesus, puts us (like Peter) in league with Satan. We show our complete distrust in Jesus' plan to save us, and opt for a “Jesus Lite” faith, where Jesus is our talisman, and we want nothing to do with carrying crosses (v. 34) or losing our lives (v. 35). We attempt to save ourselves with Jesus—our good luck charm—and pave our own road to hell with our good intentions.

PROGNOSIS: Crucified Identity

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Whose We Are*

What a relief, then, that this Jesus, whose identity Peter gets right and wrong all at the same time, sends an angel to wait outside the open tomb (after Jesus' suffering and rejection) to announce to “the disciples and Peter” that the suffering Messiah has been raised from the dead for them. Jesus links his disciples' identity not only to Jesus' own rejection, suffering, and death, but also to his resurrection. The good news is that suffering doesn't get the last word about who Jesus is, nor will it mark the disciples' identity in the end. Instead, Jesus' resurrection is his followers' resurrection. Jesus loses his life and gains it (v. 35), and shares his gain with us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Who We Are*

Jesus' “gain” produces surprising results for his disciples (then and now): Those who live in the assurance of new life in Christ, loosen up their grasp on the old life. They begin to notice that life in Jesus makes it possible to take risks. The first risk is putting their faith in Jesus' identity as Christ,

and not in their self-made identity. The second risk, related to the first, is that disciples no longer are concerned about trying to “get ahead” of Jesus; it’s more than enough of a challenge to simply stay behind Jesus, looking for his lead. They take this second risk (of following Jesus’ lead) believing that relying on Jesus—through both suffering and joy—is truly God’s will. It also appropriately identifies them as disciples, and Jesus’ as the Messiah (the one anointed to lead).

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Whose They Are* Staying “behind” Jesus, then, opens our eyes to the realities of both suffering and joy. But, following Christ, we no longer respond to the prospect of suffering with paralyzing fear or avoidance. Instead, we pull off the old blinders and see suffering for what it is—a consequence of sin, death, and Satan. For disciples, following Jesus is no longer about “good luck” or having everything go “my way.” Instead, it is about being where suffering happens and bearing Christ to those who are its victims; it’s about setting self-will aside and seeking out the other who needs Christ’s love.