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***“Beginning to Answer the Questions”***

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***Mark 8: 27-38***

*September 15, 2019*

**Mark 8:27-38**

<sup>27</sup>Jesus 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?” <sup>28</sup>And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” <sup>29</sup>He asked them, “But who do *you* say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” <sup>30</sup>And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

<sup>31</sup>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>32</sup>He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup>But 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.”

<sup>34</sup>He 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. <sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup>Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup>Those 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.”

**Beginning to Answer the Question**

Today is the beginning of our current Confirmation journey. One strong and underlying question that is part of this journey is the question Jesus asks, “who do *you* say I am?”

We as Congregationalists do not have a type of Creed or “I Believe” statement that we must sign off on in order to be a member. And in many ways, this is perhaps more of a challenge than

simply being able to enjoy our *freedom* of thought. This places the responsibility *on us* to fully participate and grow in understanding of what we believe.

The Confirmation students will write their own individual - personal "I Believe" statements. We will begin our Confirmation journey answering the following questions stating - this is what I believe about: God, Jesus, The Holy Spirit, The Bible, The Church, the World we live in, Myself, Congregationalism, Worship, The Sacraments, and Ministry. And perhaps, for some of these they will have no answer at all. And this is fine, as it is not a test that asks for a "right" answer.

As our year comes to a close in May they will look at these questions again and see for themselves if they have learned something new, or think differently about any of the topics we began with. It's a good process and if any of you would like to have an "I Believe" sheet for yourselves, just ask!

Our Tuesday book group just finished Rachel Held Evan's book, "Searching for Sunday." There was a chapter titled Confirmation, in which a father tells his daughter as the day of Confirmation approaches, "What you promise when you are confirmed is not that you will believe this forever. What you promise when you are confirmed is that this is the story you will wrestle with forever." I hope that for all of us. That we are always just beginning to answer that question and finding hope in the process.

This is not to say that our faith stays mired in confusion, but that it is formed and reformed, challenged and deepened by the way we live that question, by the way we receive and carry God in and through our every day. And more importantly that we then ask ourselves what that means for *how* we live and *what* we commit ourselves to.

By the time Jesus asks this question, the disciples have been with him for a while. They have seen Jesus heal people, they have heard him teach, and parables have been told. He has stilled a storm, cast out demons, walked on water and miraculously fed 5,000 with five loaves and two fish. They stayed alongside him when his own family tried to restrain him and when people in his home town were offended and rejected his teaching. They were there and heard "unclean spirits" call him Son of God.

Even as I note these things Jesus did, I feel a sense of caution that it should be heard as just an interesting list of stories about things Jesus did *back then*. I want to pause in awe - that with God such things *are* and will be possible.

As for those disciples, well really, they certainly have experienced a lot while traveling with Jesus.

And it is *after all these things* that he asks two questions...The first- what are you hearing, how are people reacting, who do they say I am? And the second, but who do *you* say I am?

And some of us might listen to this thinking, wow, they're right there, seeing it all firsthand- how is it they are not sure, how is it some of them seem to fumble with different answers, only willing to say what others say?

We get a clue about this after Peter finally answers, “You are the Messiah.” Because Jesus leaps *way* ahead of where they currently are- speaking of suffering, dying, and rising - much to Peter’s protest, since that seems *nothing* like the Messiah they are hoping for.

Jesus has cautioned Peter, telling him he is stuck thinking about a human kind of Messiah. And that’s the point, for Peter then, and ourselves now. We are challenged to deepen our understanding of what it means to need *and have* a messiah. A messiah that is not some puffed up bringer of prosperity for some, but one who understands loss and need, even suffering. A messiah that knows and honors vulnerability. A messiah who comes, takes us through, and stays God with us in all things.

And after the scuffle between Jesus and Peter, Jesus invites the rest of the crowd around them to become his followers, giving voice to some strange ideas about losing their life in order to save it. About giving their life over to Jesus. Confusing for them? Remember that crowd, those disciples, don’t even know what is to come. *We* listen in to this lesson already aware of the cross *and* resurrection. And knowing that, what do *you* make of the idea of losing your life in order to save it? For it means - the things of life we give to others are the things that matter, like love and kindness, mercy and forgiveness. Losing our life is all about who and what we will commit ourselves to.

And if that is so, we can imagine that some *did* drop away, their original zeal waning, wanting answers and solutions to be clearer and somehow more immediate than the miracles around them. But even though they do not *fully* understand, the disciples and others continue to follow him. You might say, living their questions along the way.

Peter is the one who makes the big claim, calling Jesus the Messiah, and yet later he will deny even knowing him. But let’s remember, even *that* denial is not the final answer between Peter and Jesus. There is hope, there is the dawning of Truth and The Way ...

For some of us the idea of questions within our faith feels wrong. Our hearts protest like Peter’s did saying, I know who Jesus is; Lord and Savior – the Way, The Truth, and the Life. That’s why I am here, to worship God, with others who believe! Don’t tell me you don’t know that too?

And yes, *I do* believe that, to the core of my being. But I also believe that my own life, like yours, has been a journey in which the ways I answer Jesus’ question, “who do you say I am?” has been met by certainties, joys and hopes as well as sorrows, confusion, and distractions.

When we are young our answers come from what others believe and say; our parents, grandparents, Sunday school teachers, the people of the church who know us, and we know them. We believe what they believe. And that role of the parent, grandparent, and teacher is so very important. They give us a place to settle into trust. Their faith gives us a sense of security, it gives us a ground in which to grow.

And we as Congregationalist *celebrate* the variety of ways we come to understanding God’s presence and purpose for us.

So, if it is not a Creed or belief statement like other denominations, then what do we *use* to begin to answer those questions, what methods are given to us?

Our call to worship this morning says the very heavens proclaim who and how God is...without words, the dawning of each day, the reality of each night reveals something of God.

We can listen for what others say about him, not only through sermons but also through open conversation with others. We can read the Bible, do Bible studies, and it is easy to find all sorts of books written by other people about him. But along the way, we also trust in the Spirit of God to speak truth, to help us understand what we believe.

When I was interviewing to take part in the Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies, this was one of the questions I was asked. Who and what is Jesus to you? And although our conversation was much longer, my first immediate response to that question came from a praise song from camp, and I said, "He is my all in all."

So yes, there are concise answers, titles like Savior, Messiah, God, son of God, Prince of Peace, Risen Christ, ...all of these titles are deep and broad with meaning.

So, let the questions come when you are grieving, and I pray you can begin to find the answer as; Comforter, Everlasting, and Hope. When you are angry at situations or people, I pray you can begin to experience the answer as; Healer, Forgiver, Teacher, and Hope. When you are awed with gratitude, I pray you will begin to answer that question with; Real Presence, Purpose, and Hope.

Jesus names himself in the gospel of John as Living Water, Bread of Life, Light of the World, the Gate, the Vine, Truth and Life, Good Shephard...the Resurrection and the Life.

But words are just beginnings as we discover along the way, what they mean to us and how then we decide to live in them.

You might have noticed during the scripture reading that Jesus doesn't really respond to the answers the disciples and Peter give - affirming or denying their answers.

I don't believe Jesus asked these two questions as a test with only one right answer. Even for those that had already been with him for a while, it was a beginning and challenge to stay alongside, because unbelievable things were yet to be lived and known. So, don't settle too quickly on being right about Jesus.

Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai wrote:

"From the place where we are right

Flowers will never grow

In the spring.

The place where we are right

Is hard and trampled

Like a yard.

But doubts and loves

Dig up the world

Like a mole, a plow.

If Jesus asks, “who do people say I am...who do you say I am?” How would you begin to answer that question in your life? How will *you* live the question?

Are you willing to risk answering that question- over and over again- out loud in the world?

Can we welcome others into the question and learn something from them?

*These* questions only you can answer. Let’s love and live Jesus’ question together.

Amen.