

September 12, 2021
Mark 8:27-38

Pentecost 16
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Show Your Work”

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

The beginning of a new school year always reminds me of my years as a student. Some of these memories are good ones; some not so good. The good memories bring to mind seeing my friends, resuming many activities that went on hiatus for the summer, and especially the beginning of football and marching band season. The less-than-great memories included getting up early on a school day, sitting through classes that were not always that exciting, and homework assignments that took up a lot of my time after school. One of the most memorable and least favourite of these memories was the return of tests, which would be a part of my life as a student through my school years and into university and seminary. While I always got decent grades, I found some tests more difficult than others, especially those in math and science, which were never my best subjects. Math tests were especially challenging, because we were graded not only on whether we got the correct answer but whether you could prove that you understood *why* this was the correct answer. At the top page of every math test were three words that every student needed to heed: **Show Your Work.**

In today’s Gospel lesson, we are reminded that the relationship between Jesus and his disciples was a relationship of teacher and student. One of the most common ways in which the disciples addressed Jesus was as “rabbi,” “teacher”; even some of Jesus’ opponents referred to him by this title. Many of Jesus’ most familiar sayings were in the context of teaching; the Sermon on the Mount is an extended teaching in which Jesus takes the position of a teacher before the crowds:

- “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them ...” – Matthew 5:1-2.

Jesus’ parables were a central part of his teaching ministry: “*He began to teach them many things in parables, and in his teaching he said to them, ‘Listen! A sower went out to sow.’*” (Mark 4:2-3). The Lord’s Prayer is even a part of the teaching of our Lord, both as a part of the Sermon on the Mount and in Luke’s account in which

Jesus gives the prayer in response to his disciples request: *“He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.’”* (Luke 11:1). Jesus was recognized and respected as a teacher who *“taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.”* (Matthew 7:29).

Our Gospel lesson begins with Jesus traveling with his disciples *“to the villages of Caesarea Philippi”* (Mark 8:27) when he suddenly springs a “pop quiz” on them: *“Who do people say that I am?”* Jesus is aware of the speculation and gossip that was swirling around his ministry and is interested in what the disciples have heard. They report what they have heard spoken about Jesus: *“John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”* (8:28). These are all highly esteemed figures from biblical history, but of course they are incorrect. So, then Jesus asks a second and far more poignant question: *“But who do you say that I am?”* (8:29). Jesus challenges the disciples to correctly identify who is the person who invited them to follow him, the one whose teachings and miracles they have witnessed. Will they be able to give the correct answer as to Jesus’ true identity?

Peter answers on behalf of the group, and he gives the correct answer: *“You are the Messiah.”* (8:29). Peter’s confession is the first correct human statement about Jesus’ identity in Mark’s Gospel. “Messiah” (“Christ”) refers to the Old Testament anointing that represents God’s affirmation that the prophet, priest, or king is the divinely chosen leader of the people (*“Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed [David] in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward.”* – 1 Samuel 16:13). Mark reflects early Christian confessions that treat “Messiah” as an indication of the unique role played by Jesus in salvation history (*“Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* – Philippians 2:9-11).

Peter’s confession distinguishes what the disciples know about Jesus from the common views about him. But Jesus’ reaction to the correct answer that Peter gives as to our Lord’s identity in Mark is very different from his reaction in Matthew’s Gospel, where Jesus responds by praising Peter and bestowing a new name and role for him:

- “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this

rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” – Matthew 16:17-19.

In Mark’s account, Jesus responds to the confession of Peter by ordering silence: *“And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.”* (8:30). The reason for this command to be silent becomes apparent in Peter’s response to Jesus’s first prediction of his coming suffering: *“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.”* (8:31). The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is at the heart of the Christian confession of faith (including the Apostles Creed that we will confess in worship this morning); but these words upend everything that a Messiah was expected to do at that time:

- “First-century Jewish messianic hopes varied, but none of them expected a messiah crucified by elders, chief priests, and scribes. Writings ... dreamt of idealized rulers who would judge the wicked and restore Israel’s righteousness.” – C. Clifton Black.

Death by crucifixion was especially abhorrent; it was an instrument designed for the victims’ utter degradation and torture, a means of death so vile that it appalled even Roman authorities (*“To bind a Roman citizen is a crime; to flog him, an abomination. To slay him is virtually an act of murder. To crucify him is – what? No fitting word can possibly describe a deed so horrible.”* – Cicero, *Against Verres*).

When Peter hears Jesus explain that the Son of Man must suffer, Peter has the audacity to take Jesus aside and rebuke him: *“And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.”* (8:32). Matthew adds Peter’s words to his account of this incident: *“God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”* (16:22). Since “rebuke” (*epitimao*) has previously been used in Mark to refer to silencing demons (*“But Jesus rebuked him, saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.”* – 1:25-26), Peter appears to think that Jesus is either insane or demon-possessed and needs to be exorcised. The verbs “took him” and “began to rebuke him” also express superiority and authority. “Take him” implies taking a person aside to instruct them (*“[Apollos] began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately.”* – Acts 18:26); it can also refer to taking over the care of another person,

as a child or invalid. The issue here is who is in charge; “*Peter tries to behave like a patron, not a disciple.*” (Lamar Williamson, Jr.).

Jesus’ response to Peter at first appears to be as harsh as his response to the Syrophenician woman in last week’s Gospel: “*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.’*” (8:33). The impact of this is even more harsh in Matthew, coming moments after praising Peter for his confession and commissioning him as the “rock” upon which Jesus will build his church. But in rebuking Jesus and seeking to dissuade him from the suffering that awaits him in Jerusalem, Peter is inadvertently taking on the role that Satan in the temptation in the wilderness, where Jesus is tempted to think that God’s anointed can avoid suffering, rejection, and death, “*that God’s rule means power without pain, glory without humiliation*” (Pheme Perkins). As Jesus began his ministry “*in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan*” (1:13), such Satanic temptation would follow him through the course of his ministry and even on the Cross, where the crowd take on the role of the Tempter in calling out to him amid his agony:

- “Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, ‘Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!’ In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, ‘He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.’ Those who were crucified with him also taunted him.” – 15:29-32.

Not only has Peter taken on the role of the Tempter in rebuking Jesus, but he has also forgotten that the place of a disciple is not to lead but to follow. “Get behind me” is a reminder that “*disciples are not to guide, protect, or possess Jesus; they are to follow him*” (Williamson). They need to learn that the Son of Man does not identify with the righteous from the distance of heaven but actually experiences their plight: “*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.*” (Hebrews 4:15). The contrast between setting one’s mind on divine things or on merely human things will be demonstrated in the teaching on discipleship that begins when Jesus summons the crowd along with his disciples to give them instruction on what it means to be a disciple of the Messiah who suffers on behalf of others:

- “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.” – 8:34-35.

The invitation to discipleship, which was originally to “*follow me and I will make you fish for people*” (1:17), is now redefined in the shadow of the Cross; “*to be a Christian is to follow Jesus on his costly way in an imitation of Christ that brushes aside the pieties usually associated with that phrase*” (Williamson). The primary cause of the persecution and possible death envisaged in these sayings about taking up one’s cross and losing one’s life is testimony to the truth of the gospel. In John’s Gospel, Jesus warns that “*this is the testimony, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil*” (John 3:19). Fidelity to Jesus brings persecution, because the disciples live in an age that is contrary to God (“*this adulterous and sinful generation*” – 8:38). The adjectives “sinful” and “adulterous” echo the words of Old Testament prophets who issued similar warnings:

- “Ah, sinful nation, people laden with iniquity, offspring who do evil, children who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the LORD, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, who are utterly estranged ... How the faithful city has become a whore! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her – but now murderers!” – Isaiah 1:4, 21.
- “Therefore the showers have been withheld, and the spring rain has not come; yet you have the forehead of a whore, you refuse to be ashamed.” – Jeremiah 3:3.

A disciple proves that they are truly a follower of Jesus not only by giving the correct answer, confessing that “Jesus Christ is Lord,” but also by “showing their work” in the way they live in obedience to Christ’s command to follow him in the way of the Cross. Christian discipleship is not a mere intellectual assent; it is faith that is active in daily living, in embodying the love of Christ in the way in which one lives. It means that they are called to turn away from their former pursuits, selfish desires and ambitions, to follow the one who “*did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.*” (Philippians 2:7-8). Being a faithful follower of Jesus means that we witness to the truth of the Gospel in both word and deed, as Jesus responded to John the Baptist’s question “*are you the one who is to*

come, or are we to wait for another?” by pointing to his deeds that testified to the authenticity of his identity: “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” (Matthew 11:3-5). As Jesus’ deeds of lovingkindness show that he is truly the Messiah, so will the disciples of Christ prove that they are truly his disciples not only by what they say but especially in how they show their work in obedience to Jesus’ command to “love one another”: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35).

- “The image of the Son of Man holds both promise and warning. Those who confess Jesus to be Messiah and Son of God must be faithful disciples. They cannot expect the gospel to match the desires and demands of the larger society.” – Perkins.

Giving the correct answer was not sufficient if we wanted to pass our math tests; we needed to show our work to prove that we understood how and why this is the correct answer. It is important for us as Christians to learn the basics of our faith and what it means to be a Christian; in the services of Holy Baptism that we are celebrating this weekend, we charge the parents and sponsors who bring their children to the waters of baptism to “*teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, place in their hands the holy scriptures, and nurture them in faith and prayer*” (ELW Holy Baptism). Christian education is a vital part of the ministry of all congregations, so that we might learn and be blessed by the Word of God that is “*a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path*” (Psalm 119:105). But knowing these teachings and giving the current answers is insufficient if we are to live as God’s faithful followers; it must be accompanied by going out into the world to love and serve the Lord, following Jesus in the path of servanthood so that all people “*will know we are Christians by our love.*”

- “We are not our own; therefore neither our reason nor our will should predominate in our deliberations and actions. We are not on our own; therefore let us not propose it as our end, to seek what may be expedient for us according to the flesh. We are not our own; therefore let us, as far as possible, forget ourselves and all things that are ours. On the contrary, we are God’s; to him, therefore, let us live and die. We are God’s; therefore let his wisdom and will preside in all our actions. We are God’s; towards him, therefore, as our only legitimate end, let every part of our lives be directed.” – John Calvin.

I do not remember much from my high school math classes, but I do remember the important words at the top of every test: **Show Your Work.** Learning what we believe and teach as Christians is only the beginning; we need to show that we truly believe that Jesus Christ is Lord by living according to his words, by following his example, by walking in his footsteps. May we strive to be a faithful church, a servant church *“that longs to be a partner in Christ’s sacrifice and clothed in Christ’s humanity.”* (ELW Hymn 729). May our works show that we are the people of God; let us shine the light of Christ before others *“so that they see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”* (Matthew 5:16).

Amen.