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Psalm 8 (Psalms/Now Version); Mark 8:27-38
"Who Am I"

The gospel text today is about identity.

It begins with Jesus at the mid-point of his ministry. To this point, he has brought new insights about one's relationship to God and humanity and performed healing and feeding feats of wonder. He arrives at a small village with his disciples and asks an intriguing question: "Who do people say that I am?"

We can ask this question of ourselves. We might not want to and yet there are times when we'd like to know what others are saying about us.

One assumes that Jesus had a pretty good sense of who he was and wanted to check this against what others are saying about him.

If people in general asked this question the answers would probably relate to their careers or family status so it's not surprising that Jesus' disciples tell him that some say he is John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets: a reincarnation of these great figures which is interesting from a Jewish biblical point of view.

The replies don't satisfy Jesus so he addresses his disciples personally: "But who do you say that I am?"

Peter, who has been unusually quiet, says, "You are the Messiah." He nails it. The gospels in general point to the fact that Jesus is the Anointed One of God which is Messiah in Hebrew and Christ in Greek and that's why Jesus came to be known as "Jesus Christ" or "Jesus the Christ."

Jesus seems satisfied with this reply: who he thinks he is correlates with what another person thinks he is. He orders them not to tell anyone about him which is a tacit agreement about his identity as Messiah.

It is said that he wanted his messiah ship to remain a secret because he wanted to continue his ministry in relative quiet. The religious authorities would see it as blasphemy and the people would flock to him.

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Since Jesus stopped to ask what others thought of him it might be good for us to take stock of ourselves in the light of Jesus. At center is the question: "Who Am I?"

Think for a few seconds who you are.

Where do we start? Do we begin with our name, gender, marital status, occupation, history, genes, age or spirituality? We can begin anywhere and whatever we say will give a glimpse of who we are.

Yesterday, John Girton shared his passion about sustainable, social responsible investing at the monthly Saturday breakfast. A few months ago his wife Tani spoke about her journey as a woman breaking through the glass ceiling at the bank which reminded me of my mother. John and Tani are serious finance persons and they are parents of two lovely children and they are members of this church which says a lot about who they are.

One of the most fascinating expressions of an ego-laden identity was that of Usain Bolt, the Jamaican sprinter at the recent Olympics. After being the first person in history to win the 100 and 200 meter races in consecutive Olympics he gave his characteristic spear pose and spoke into the cameras that he was “number one and a legend” – even if he said so himself.

I might think I’m the greatest person in the world – even the messiah – but how do others see me? This reminds me of composer and singer Dan Bern. His birth name is Bernstein. He sings:

Everybody's waiting for the Messiah
 The Jews are waiting
 The Christians are waiting
 Oh so are the Muslims
 It's like everybody's waiting
 They been waiting a long time
 I know how I hate to wait
 Like even for a bus or something
 An important phone call
 So I can imagine how darned impatient
 Everyone must be getting

So I think it's time now
 Time to reveal myself
 I am the Messiah
 I am the Messiah

Yes I think you heard me right
 I am the Messiah
 I was gonna wait till next year
 Build up the suspense a little
 Make it a really big surprise
 But I could not resist
 It's like when you got a really big secret

You're just bursting to tell someone
 It was kinda like that with this
 And now that I've told you
 I feel this great weight lifted
 Dr. Nussbaum was right
 He's my therapist
 He said get it out in the open

To check our identity with others helps us see our strong and convincing and delusional senses of ourselves but we cannot rely entirely on others. People can be sorely inaccurate as we see in today's race to the polls where candidates are vilified in the meanest way.

We can even be put-down and oppressed in religious circles. Jesus says in the text today 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."

Jesus knows that the religious authorities will not tolerate his out-of-the-box religiosity and will do away with him with the aid of political forces. The same thing happened to saints through the ages.

In the end Jesus receives the most accurate gauge of himself from his closest disciple. Others are fairly accurate and complimentary but Peter says it as he sees it and how Jesus sees it. I know that the person who most accurately reflects who I am is Suellen. I think I do the same for her but she doesn't always agree with me. 😊

What's the point of checking our identity with others? As stated, Jesus was interested in knowing how accurately others read his vocation and he was checking his religious temperature from the perspective of others.

He was concerned about congruency and about his life. If others saw the success of his messiahship he was in trouble. Thus, the so-called Messianic secret.

While Jesus was a full-time religious teacher and was gauged in these terms the principle of the story applies to all of us in the church. No matter who we are and what we do our identity is primarily wrapped up in our faith.

From a biblical perspective our primary reality *is* our religious identity. Psalms 8 states it beautifully in its address to God.

...You have made me in Your image
 You have called me your son.
 You have ordained me as Your priest
 And chosen me to be Your servant.
 You have assigned to me
 The fantastic responsibility

Of carrying on Your creative activity.

Paul in Ephesians writes: "We are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works." (Ephesians 2:10a). We are gifted with God's grace through faith. Our lives are whole and wholesome in Christ Jesus.

The gospel text today is about identity.

In the context of thinking and affirming who we are we wonder what others think of us. Jesus is concerned about congruency and commitment. The remainder of the text is about commitment. Christianity is not an easy path. It's willingness to follow Jesus in challenging the forces that deny peace and loving justice.

In the final analysis, we are challenged us to name, affirm, integrate and proclaim our identity in Jesus Christ in order to live whole and healthy lives and to build a better world. Amen.