“Follow Me”
Mark 8: 27-38

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From the Pulpit
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Jesus asks his disciples to answer a question that stands the test of time. “Who do people say that I am?” (They answer: Elijah, John the Baptist, some prophet.)

Skip ahead a few centuries. Let’s say Jesus asks the same question on the streets of New York City. New Yorkers say:

- A reason to believe and continue on in your life your journey…
- An important Guy. Good morals and beliefs with a special gift.
- A godly type guy.
- Jesus is my Lord and Savior.

Well, a Street Survey a few years ago also captured these from New Yorkers:

- A White guy with a beard.
- He died for our sins so that we could be saved….that means we can “screw” up as many times as we want to and as long as we say we are sorry then we are ok.
- He’s not that blonde hair dude they show in all the pictures.
- Uh, he was Jewish?
- Just a story made up by someone. I guess he could be a real person, but not like the story says.
- Jesus? A friend of mine from Puerto Rico
Jesus, like Jesus, the Son of God?  
I don’t know Jesus very well.¹

If you take that question to the streets of Columbus, you get much of the same. Take it to brunch with you, who do people say Jesus is? Take it home!

In our text this morning, Jesus’ disciples have been with him for some months now, maybe a year or more. They listen to him preach many times, watch him heal the sick, and enjoy talks into wee hours of the Galilean night. And now, after all this, Jesus finally asks them “the big question.” Well, Jesus makes no comment on their public opinion report.

More than who does the crowd, the culture, or the world say, Jesus has a bigger question for the disciples, “But who do you say that I am?”

Peter answers for them, “You are the Messiah.” That is to say, “You are the Anointed One, the Chosen One. You’re not some figure from the past in new guise, but the One the world’s been waiting for. You’re the One we’ve been waiting for.”

¹ Found on You Tube from TED Ed.com  http://ed.ted.com/on/qbJ4PXvl#review
Ever tried to answer this question for yourself? Who is Jesus? I led confirmation classes that explored this question over the course of a few months. It was not for these young people to recite an old creed or repeat what others have said, but for them to figure out how to answer that for themselves? “Who do you say that I am?”

It’s a fair question? Today is the Celebration Sunday and the kick-off to educational program year. Might as well kick-it off with the question that keeps coming up through the centuries. It’s a question we need to ask people of every age. For our toddlers, for our youth, for our young adults, for our elders?

It’s a question worth our best effort. It’s why we share the stories of scripture each week in worship. It’s why we engage our children in beloved Bible Stories so they will come to know for themselves who Jesus is. This year, it’s why we will delve into topics of justice and human trafficking and compassion and the Economy of Love so we can more fully answer this question for ourselves.

It’s why we wrestle with how to follow what Jesus has to say and follow him into places that we do not want to go.
It’s why we feel drawn to speak out and help those who Jesus would help and stand up to unjust systems in our community and world.

Right now, we might give answers straight out of a creed…. Teacher, Rabbi, Healer, Savior, Social Witness.

Others may say, “Jesus is my friend.” Jesus was not just a historical figure, but somehow “a friend” with whom I have a “personal relationship.” Jesus leads me and guides me. Jesus walks with me. We talk to Jesus and we talk back to Jesus. We also shy away from talking about our “up close and personal” relationship with Jesus. We may even shy away from saying his name.

I know I did, I would openly talk about God’s love in the world, God’s grace poured out for all, but get me to say the words Jesus Christ…..that was another story. It was too close. The “me and Jesus” type of relationship is something “other” churches talk about, not mine. The intimate one on one relationship is not something that I want or need. It gets too personal.
You and I may or may not resonate with the terminology, but it points straight to the great truth of the Christian faith:

Jesus Christ is not just a memory.
Jesus Christ is not just a back-then wise teacher who said spiritually insightful things that got him killed.
Jesus Christ is not just a theological Plato.
Jesus Christ is not just a guy who spoke truth back then and died and we remember what he said.
Jesus, this faith of ours stubbornly insists, is a living, present reality, risen and somehow with us – now, here, personally, the One with whom we really can be in relationship.

Living relationships transform faith. It transforms faith from being about following a dead guy’s teaching or trying to obey lofty rules suggested by an historical figure. It transforms faith into a breathing, living, immediate, intimate relationship with God.²

Jesus’ invitation to us is to answer this question for ourselves and as a community of faith. This is an invitation to a living relationship that transforms our faith. One that connects us,

² Sermon idea preached from Michael L. Lindvall, The Brick Presbyterian Church. [www.brickchurch.org](http://www.brickchurch.org)
like Peter, to the One we are waiting for. It’s an invitation from Jesus to follow him.

But, we aren’t very good at following. We don’t hold up followers in the United States. I am pretty sure Columbus has awards breakfasts for community volunteers and leaders, not community followers. It’s just not the American Way. We don’t have Centers for the Advancement of Christian Followers. We don’t fund programs or endow chairs of Christian Followership. “When ‘following’ comes up it’s usually negative. Don’t be a follower, be a leader. Don’t follow the crowd. Being a follower is weak and passive. It’s for people who can’t think or act for themselves.⁴

I cannot recall a time in my academic or vocational pursuits when someone posed this to me, “Tell me about a time when you followed.” It always tends to be the opposite “Tell me about a time when you led a group, led change, led transformation.

A quick Google search on Christian Leadership gets some 8.5 million hits. Christian followership?? – a mere 70,000. Obviously even Google asserts leadership over followership.

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³ JC Austin, www.day1.org sermon “Following Jesus is for losers.”
We hear the phrase “Lead. Follow. Or Get out of way!” It’s forceful. It’s direct. We most likely hear these words spoken from someone who is taking the lead or jockeying for position. They mean, “Here’s where I am heading, are you coming with me or are you going to get in my way?”

Don’t get me wrong, there are good reasons to follow. You need help getting to a place you need to get to – so you follow what your GPS (most of the time-it’s accurate). You follow because someone else knows something you don’t know. You follow because another knows where he is going and wants you to come along.

I follow the latest world news. I follow tour guides who carry red umbrellas up in the air. I follow a good ‘Scandal’ on TV. I follow a podcast or two.

One of the places in our world where you are encouraged to become a follower is the online social networking service called “Twitter.” Twitter connects people together where you can send and receive short 140-character messages called “tweets.” Follow someone on Twitter and you receive everything they “tweet.” A few months ago I opened up my own Twitter account. Now I will tell you that I am a novice. I follow people who know things I don’t know. Who you follow on Twitter says a lot about you.
Presbyterian Pastor J.C. Austin writes this about following:
Not long ago I logged into my Twitter account; and as it opened up, I glanced over in the corner of the screen where there's a box entitled "Who to follow." It's always there when you log in; it contains the names and pictures of people that Twitter thinks you might want to follow, and each one of them has a little button marked "follow" that you can just click to start following them. On this particular day, though, Twitter went beyond being a social networking service and became an online evangelist because it said that I should follow Jesus Christ, literally. It was right there. A Twitter feed for Jesus Christ. With his picture and everything. Oh, come on, I'm a minister--what was I going to do: not follow Jesus Christ? So, I clicked the button next to his name marked "follow," and now I regularly get updates from "Jesus Christ," which are sometimes funny, sometimes provocative, and often insightful. Not all that different from the Jesus we encounter in Scripture, when you think about it.
If there had been Twitter in the first century, Jesus (the real Jesus) probably would have been pretty popular. Lots of people wanted to follow him to see what he was doing and hear what he had to say. By the time this story happens, Jesus has made quite a name for himself. He's been barnstorming the countryside on a streak of healings and exorcisms and other miracles; he's been saying a lot of things that are sometimes funny, sometimes provocative, and often insightful, and the crowds follow everything he says and does. And, of course, he's got a closer group of followers, the disciples.\textsuperscript{4}

In today’s passage, Jesus takes an opportunity to clarify what it means to follow him. “If you want to become my followers, let them 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.” (Mk 8: 34-35)

\textsuperscript{4} JC Austin.
It could be the worst marketing scheme in all the world. Follow me! It won’t be easy. Jesus doesn’t say: Follow me and you’ll gain a lot of riches. Follow me and your life will be easy. Follow me and you’ll be happy. Follow me and the people you love will be safe.

Nope. Jesus says, Follow me and you will lose your life. You will lose your life for the sake of the Gospel.

If you want to follow me, he say, this is where I am going. If you want eternal life, you don’t get there with riches and things of world. You don’t get there by quibbling over the small things. It’s not about the accumulation of stuff to make us happy, or bigger houses or structures.

A life following Jesus Christ opens our conversation to a living, breathing, up close and personal relationship with the living God. Jesus offers us the way to a life unburdened by this world and into one that is full of love and wholeness and healing. Jesus leads us to a life that is flowing with God’s overwhelming care for all God’s children. Such a life can be realized only if we are willing to risk. We have to risk love, risk failure, risk saying the wrong thing, risk looking foolish, risk falling on our faces, and risk our very lives.
The real Jesus has followers who are eager and willing to follow. He certainly knows where he is going. Read on in the Gospel of Mark--The path of following Jesus certainly leads to Jerusalem. He’s on his way there. He’s going there to face those who would falsely accuse him, torture him, ridicule him and leave him on a cross to die. We know that story…in three days, he will be raised from the dead. All that is for the sake of the Gospel and for the fulfillment of God’s story here on earth.

Earlier this week at the recommendation of a friend, I went on Twitter and searched for “Jesus Christ” and now I too am following Jesus Christ. J.C. Austin was right. Tweets from Jesus Christ are funny and provocative and often insightful. One line this past week said “In Silicon Valley, with a tech start-up, going to change the world.” Or my current favorite, “They say abstinence is 100% effective for birth control. Tell that to my mom.”

—All in good fun, most of them are superficial. There is nothing superficial about the real Jesus.

Jesus seems to be saying that God is interested in the very deep and meaningful parts of our lives. God deeply cares that we are connected and in community and a part of
something bigger than ourselves. When we lose our life, it is God who will meet us and offer us more life. There is always more life in store where our life comes from, and even when our own lives run out God will have more life in store for us.⁵

Jesus invites us into a life that matters. How we get there? Well, that’s another sermon. We can start with a life lived together in community and lived to the fullest in the knowledge and love of God. We can start by risking and entering the living and breathing and up close and personal kind of relationship with Jesus Christ.

Who do you say that I am? He asks. Follow me.

Amen.

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