

**Mark 8:27-35**

The way to make money on a game show is really quite simple—answer the questions correctly and you win. If you know the answer you could become rich, as Ken Jennings discovered last year on Jeopardy. People apply this same logic toward spiritual riches. They think that knowing the right answers about God guarantees a bank account in heaven. The polls tell us that  $\frac{3}{4}$  of all Americans believe that Jesus is God, but only  $\frac{1}{4}$  of Americans attend church. What are they thinking? One explanation must be that people are satisfied with knowing about Jesus without feeling the need to make a commitment to Him.

Peter got the answer right when Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do you say I am?” “You are the Christ,” was his response. Peter might have marked that day on his calendar with a happy face, except that Jesus didn’t leave it at that. Peter got the multiple choice question correct but he failed miserably on the essay question. “What does it mean, Peter, that I am the Christ?” When Jesus explained that it meant suffering and death, Peter disagreed. He even rebuked Jesus for His words. But he was wrong. “Get behind Me, Satan,” Jesus told him, “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

Later in life, church tradition tells us that Peter finally got the essay part of the test right. He refused to deny Jesus even though it meant suffering and death for him. Peter was led to a cross where he was crucified. But because of his respect for Christ, he insisted that his cross be turned upside-down. To this day in the church, the symbol for the Apostle Peter is the upside-down cross.

I’m pretty confident that if we had a multiple choice test to take, our congregation’s members would get the answer correct. Unlike the people of Jesus’ day who thought that Jesus was: A) John the Baptist, B) Elijah, or C) One of the prophets, I believe that you and I would say, “None of the above,” and we would agree with Peter that Jesus is the Christ—He is the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

But lest we get too comfortable with ourselves here, I might point out that even Satan would get that question correct. So as Luther was prone to do, let’s go further with our question, because Jesus does, and ask, “What does this mean?” We already heard what it means for most Americans—not much. Knowing who Jesus is does not affect their life a whole lot. It certainly doesn’t cause them to want to know Jesus better and understand what He said and did for them. James would not even call such knowledge, “faith.” In our Epistle lesson he says, “Don’t tell me you have faith—show me!” “I don’t just want to hear who Jesus is from your mouth—I want to see what Jesus means to you by how you live!”

There is a young man from East Africa attending one of our Lutheran seminaries. After his studies he is planning on returning to his home country to build a church, and he is very much aware of the fact that in doing so, he will be killed. This man, more than Peter at first, understands what it means that Jesus is the Christ. He understands what it means to live your faith. He understands the part about “taking up your cross and following Jesus.”

Jesus suffered and died on a cross for sinners like us. He did this to free us from our sins. Knowing this, believing this, our life will be shaped by the cross. This doesn’t mean that we must, necessarily, hang upside-down from one like Peter. It doesn’t mean that we must build a church and suffer death for it. It does mean that whatever hardships and sufferings

come to us because of our faith in Jesus Christ, we do not run from them. We do not deny our Savior even though we are ridiculed for our faith. We do, however, deny ourselves. We do not give in to our flesh, but we live as Christians in this world.

It's easy for us, however, to confess that Jesus was "crucified, dead, and buried." It's not so easy to reflect that in how we live. We're a lot like Peter...in his "early days." We don't like crosses. We're against suffering. And we would rather deny Christ than deny ourselves. Like Peter, we don't even like it all that much that God spends so much time talking about suffering and death. We don't like to be uncomfortable, and we get that way when the church focuses our attention on crosses, blood, and death. We like to hear about love, peace, and heaven, not about Christians today being killed for the sake of the Gospel.

Jesus' words to Peter are also for us: "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men." The only way that anyone from Augusta, Washington, or Marthasville, is going to understand the love of God is by gazing at the bloody cross of Jesus. He suffered for you because He loves you. He died for you there because you and I angered God by our selfish living. Jesus underwent your punishment, and because He did, God is at peace with you. You who are members of Christ Lutheran Church, and those of you who are guests, can speak of heaven, and of going there, precisely because Jesus was punished and killed on your behalf. Even though our lives may not reflect very well the fact that Jesus "was crucified, dead, and buried," it happened for you. And even though we prefer to live, not for Him who died for us, but for ourselves, He died for you anyway.

There is something you should know about the words of our text. They were penned by Mark—a companion of Peter. Earlier in his life, Mark was on a missionary trip with Paul and Barnabas, and he faced hardships on the trip, and Mark abandoned the others, returning home. He refused to take up his cross and follow Jesus. But later in his life, just a few years after the death of Peter—after his bloody upside-down crucifixion, Mark now has the courage to write the words of this Gospel, and his name is put on it—the Gospel of St. Mark. Something happened to Mark over the years. Perhaps watching fellow Christians suffer for the sake of the Gospel. Perhaps seeing his friend and mentor, Peter, martyred for the Faith. Through all this, Mark became courageous.

Fellow Christians, today all over this world there are brothers and sisters in Christ who are being given a cross of suffering to bear. Because of their faith in the Crucified One they are persecuted and even put to death. We don't know that kind of suffering. In His wisdom, God has not given us here that kind of a cross to bear. And it appears that we have become weak as a result. There are people in Somalia who are beaten just for their desire to learn about Jesus Christ. And yet, here, with no threats against us, we hardly spend any time at all in the study of God's Word. There are Christians throughout East Africa who give to the Lord even though they have little to nothing, and here we are with every material blessing and our church is deep in debt. There are Christians in Southeast Asia who go to the Lord's House regularly, even though it may cost them their lives, and here we are with no such threats, and empty pews are a common sight every Sunday morning.

Perhaps James would say to us, "Show me your faith!" "You give the right answer to the question about Jesus Christ—now show me what Jesus means to you!" Jesus puts it this way in our text, "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me." Have we here at Christ Lutheran Church laid our crosses down and

run in the other direction? Have we gotten into the habit of confessing Christ with our lips but then denying Him with our lives? What is God to think when He looks at us—when He looks for the fruits of faith in our lives?

Friend, do not fear. There is good news for you. God looks, not at your works, but at Jesus' works for you. He looks at Jesus' perfect life, and He sees it covering you in your baptism. He looks at Jesus' suffering and death, and He sees you a forgiven child. God looks, not at your commitment to Him, but at Jesus' commitment to you. He sees the blood of His Son on the cross of Calvary, and that blood has washed away every one of your sinful stains. He sees His Son rising from the tomb, and that victory He gives to you.

What does it mean that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior of the world? It means that God is not angry with you. It means that you are forgiven. God pardons each and every one of you. There is no sin of yours that can keep you out of heaven. Jesus has washed away all your sins in Holy Baptism.

Even though the Apostle James wants to see evidence of our faith in how we live, God looks only at what His Son has done for you. God does not look for the crosses that you take up—He looks only to the cross of Jesus, and He declares you innocent of all wrongdoing, and for Jesus' sake He gives heaven to you.

We know that Jesus is the Christ. What does this mean for you? It means that no matter what suffering you endure in life, God will not abandon you. In Christ, you are a forgiven child of God. Amen.