

Mark 8:27-38

I know of a young man who caused a stir some years ago because for a while, whenever anyone asked him, "How are you?" he would tell them. Instead of responding, "I'm fine, how are you?" he would launch into a rather detailed account of his ailments, his accomplishments, his relationships, and anything else he could think of. He did this as a study of human nature, and what he discovered is that typically when people ask, "How are you?" they really don't want to know. Rather, it's just a polite way of saying, "Hello." Your doctor may be the only person who really wants an honest answer, but when most others ask you how you are doing, they'd prefer that you lie and tell them you're fine even if you're not.

In today's text Jesus asks some rather pointed questions, but the last thing He wants are some brush-off answers. His questions do not have to do with how you're feeling, but they dig much deeper into the heart. Jesus' questions in Mark 8 demand that we not only give an honest answer, but that we live by our answer and commit to it.

It may be helpful for us to look at Jesus' questions today using Martin Luther's formula. In the Small Catechism he teaches the Christian Faith by first asking a question and then asking, "What does this mean?" For example he asks, "What is the First Commandment?" and following the answer, he then asks, "What does this mean?" Let's use this same formula today. The original question Jesus wants us to consider is the one He put to His disciples at Caesarea Philippi: "Who do you say I am?" Peter's answer is correct... "You are the Christ." But we cannot leave it at that because Jesus doesn't. His follow-up questions can be summarized by then asking, "What does this mean?" Let's do that now.

First the question, "Who do you say I am?" This is no "how are you?" type of question. This is a question that demands from us an answer from our heart. Who really is Jesus of Nazareth? Others have answered the question in various ways. In Peter's day many were saying that Jesus was John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets. In our day many are willing to admit that Jesus was a great man; that He was someone we should imitate; that He taught many good ideas, but they refuse to go so far as to acknowledge that Jesus is the Son of God, the Savior of sinners.

To be perfectly honest, it does not matter what others are saying about Jesus. What matters is what you say about Him. Jesus brushed off all of those ridiculous answers which were being given 2,000 years ago, and He pointed His finger directly at His disciples and said, "But who do you say I am?" And that finger is pointing at us today.

Do you say with Peter, "Jesus, you are the Christ?" Do you confess that He is the only Savior you've got? Do you give answer to the hope within you that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary for you; that He is true Man and yet true God? Every time we confess the creeds of the church we answer with Peter in this way. We acknowledge that there is salvation in no one else except Jesus Christ alone. We freely proclaim the truth that He suffered, died, and rose again for us.

To get this question wrong is to be outside the framework of the Christian Church. To stop short of naming Jesus as the Christ; as He who is the Savior of the world, is to be something other than a Christian. But do not be puffed up that you know the correct answer to His

question. For the answer did not come from within us. It has been revealed to us by God. It is His Holy Spirit who teaches us to say with Peter, "You are the Christ. You are my Lord and Savior."

Now when someone asks you, "How are you?" he may want to move on after receiving your quick answer. Not Jesus. After hearing us confess in the creeds, "You are the Christ," He looks at us and asks, "Then what does this mean?" The way He said it to His disciples in Caesarea Philippi was like this, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and yet lose his soul?" If you believe I am the Christ, then you need to be following Me. What good is it for you if you believe I am your Savior; if you answer My question correctly, but then you follow after the sinful world and walk away from Me?

There are many in our day who do not want to go there. They would like to give their answer without commitment. They will confess, "You are the Christ," but they avoid the follow-up question, "What does this mean?" They like to view themselves as Christians but they do not want to live for Christ.

Few answers that we give in life call for commitment, but this one does. It's a little like a husband and wife answering the question put to them on their wedding day: "Do you take this man...this woman...to be your lawfully wedded husband or wife?" To answer, "I do," does not end it because the answer calls for commitment. If a husband or wife has no intention of living in a committed relationship with their spouse, rather than promising, "I do," they should answer, "I don't." And the same thing is true of our life with Christ.

We are only deceiving ourselves if we confess that Jesus is the Christ but then we live as if He is not. What does it mean if we answer with Peter, "You are the Christ, my Savior," but we ignore the preaching and teaching of His Word? What does it mean if we answer the question correctly about who Jesus is, but we have no desire to live that answer? What does it mean if we say that Jesus died for us, but we have little respect for His body and blood given us in His Sacrament? And what does it mean if we can confess Jesus here in church, but out there we act like we're ashamed of Him?

Using Luther's formula asking, "What does this mean?" we hear today that there are two answers to this question. There is our answer, and there is Jesus' answer. What does it mean for us that Jesus is the Christ? Sadly it means that we often live as though it did not matter. What does it mean for us? Too often it means that you and I fail to commit to Jesus even though He is our Lord and Christ. It means that we live shamefully as His disciples even though we know better.

But Jesus also answers this question, and you may want to hear His answer. What does it mean for Jesus that He is the Christ? It means He loves you no matter how you have lived. It means He forgives you for not committing to Him as we should. What does it mean for Jesus that He is the Christ? It means He was determined to suffer and die for you, and nothing could prevent Him because He sees you as precious to Him. It means that even though we are too often ashamed to be seen as His disciples, He was not ashamed to be stripped, beaten, and crucified for you. What it means for Jesus that He is the Christ is that He does not reject you even though we often reject Him. It means that He does not stop forgiving you even though we often live for this sinful world. It means He will not give up

on you. He comes to you with His words today to live in you and enable you to live for Him; to enable you to confess Him not just in here, but also out there.

And Jesus commits to His answer even though, sadly, we do not always commit to ours. He does not go back on His word. He said, “I do” to you in your baptism, and He has always lived those words. He does everything He promised to do. He gave Himself up for you on the cross once, and He now gives Himself to you in His Word and Sacraments. He strengthens your faith though His words coming into your ears. He puts His peace into your heart. He does not leave you nor forsake you. He does what His words of absolution declare—He pardons your sins no matter how grievous they are.

Jesus’ question to you is not some simple “how are you?” type of question. He looks into your soul and asks, “Who am I?” and then He tells you what it means for you that He is the Christ, your Lord and Savior—it means, friend, that you are able to commit your life to Him because He is with you, and in you, and for you. It means that you can live this week with joy each and every day because you do not live for yourself, but for Him who has committed to you—Jesus the Christ. Amen.