

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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.”

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

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A Baptist pastor, a Roman Catholic priest and an Episcopal priest all die on the same day. Waiting in line at the gates to heaven, they see Jesus Christ himself walking toward them.

Pointing to the Baptist, Jesus asks: “Who do you say that I am?” “Hmm,” the pastor says, “well, the Bible says...” “No,” Jesus interrupts. “Please step back.”

Turning to the Roman Catholic, Jesus asks again: “Who do you say that I am?” The priest pauses for a moment and then says, “His Holiness Pope Francis says...” “No,” says Jesus. “Please step back.”

Now the Episcopal priest is nervous. “Who do *you* say that I am?” “Oh, well, um,” the priest says, “you are the Anointed One, the Son of the living God.” Jesus smiles and nods, and turns to walk away. “Well, but on the other hand,” says the priest...

It’s so often true, isn’t it, that our greatest strengths are about the width of a dime away from our greatest weaknesses. Part of the Episcopalian identity is our capacity for ambiguity that makes room for multiple interpretations and nuances. And yet, that same openness can also frustrate people who might really be served by a simple answer to the question: “Who do you say that Jesus Christ is?”

Because when people ask us that question, they are implying a second question: “Who do you say that *you* are?”

The people surrounding Mark's Jesus are asking inevitable questions about him. His words and his actions are raising speculations and expectations. Questions about who this Jesus really is run through the entire Gospel of Mark.

And today's reading is between two stories about Jesus giving people sight. It's a literary technique that Mark's Gospel uses to frame something important, like a word sandwich. Now, if you want to make people roll their eyes, the technical term is "intercalation."

In six weeks, we will hear the story of Jesus giving Bartimaeus his sight. That will be the second slice of bread. The passage just before our reading was the first slice. And *that* story has an unusual detail that is also a clue. Jesus had to touch that man's eyes twice because the first touch gave him only partial sight.

Our reading this morning is some of the meat between these two stories in Mark's scriptural sandwich (and, yes, I'm aware that I've over-stretched this metaphor!)

In the first of another two-touch progression, Jesus probes his followers' understanding by asking: "Who do people say that I am?" He's not looking for correct answers so much as he is touching their awareness.

And he learns that what people see is generally right even if they are not seeing with full clarity yet. The people have situated him in the company of the prophets. He does, in fact, share the spirit of John the Baptizer and Elijah. The people's guesses are reasonable, just partial. Jesus did, after all, receive the baptism of John, and his actions and teachings are certainly aligned with Elijah's.

And so Jesus touches the awareness of his followers a second time: "But you, who do *you* say that I am?" Peter gives the right word although he does not yet see the true meaning: "You are the Anointed."

The disciples' understanding is still a bit hazy and they are not yet ready for prime time. Jesus begins to teach them. His teaching is so counterintuitive that he has to give them three separate predictions of his coming passion and resurrection. Each is followed by a partial misunderstanding on the part of the disciples. And each is followed by teachings about who he is and about what it means to follow him.

In the first prediction that we just heard, Jesus told his followers that the Son of Man would suffer many things, be rejected by the chief priests and scribes, killed and then rise again after three days.

And so, Peter was mostly right – Jesus is the Messiah. There are a few essential details that escape Peter. Jesus will be a *suffering* Messiah, a *self-giving* servant rather than a *self-serving* King. And for Jesus to be the Son of Man means that Jesus lives in solidarity with

God *and* with others who experience rejection, suffering and death, and who will come to experience resurrection.

The new humanity that Jesus envisions evokes the true name of all who follow him. As we become aware of our identity as children of God, we are also revealed as children of humanity. Like Jesus, our brother, the Anointed of God, we start living into the fullness of our deepest, truest selves.

Peter reacts to this unfamiliar vision of the Anointed by taking Jesus aside and scolding him. And Jesus responds with the verbal equivalent of a Zen master's bamboo awakening stick, a *kyōsaku*, smacked against Peter's shoulders: "Get behind me, Accuser!"

Jesus is not angry at Peter. He delivers the shocking reprimand as a compassionate means to reinvigorate Peter, not as punishment, but to interrupt Peter's focus so that he might see something new.

Jesus's turning and looking at his disciples is more than a simple physical rotation. He is dropping into a deeper level of awareness and taking his followers with him, as if to say: "Wake up! You are dwelling inside your small human mind while I am revealing your birthright in the eternal consciousness of God."

And then Jesus transmits a teaching for all his followers. "If anyone wishes to become my follower, let them deny themselves [that is to say, the smallest self-protective version of themselves] let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow."

Discipleship is not focused on saving or enhancing our status in this "adulterous and sinful generation." Discipleship is not focused on improving our odds of winning a ticket into heaven. When we focus our attention on either of these goals, we lose sight of a larger life.

Our ability to focus attention is a strength of the human mind. And just the width of a dime away is the one of the weaknesses of human consciousness. When we give all our attention to one object, one idea, one perspective, all others are excluded. This reality is precisely how most stage and close-up magic work.

Back in my bartending days, I did a little sleight-of-hand magic to earn more tips and I can tell you that you would be surprised or maybe a little disappointed at how simple most of those tricks are. Magic relies on getting us to focus very closely, while the magician does something right before our eyes, but outside our attention.

What Jesus is doing is not magic. In fact, it is nearly the opposite. Jesus is trying to teach us that it is crucial to focus our attention on what is most valuable. Putting all our energy into gaining the entire Kosmos is a non-starter. We only lose what is most valuable.

And so instead of centering all our attention on the small sense of ourselves, Jesus teaches us to focus our entire selves on God's love. With practice, we train our bodies, minds and hearts – we focus our lives – on following the impulses of that love.

Over time, God's love inspires us to serve the well-being of others, to seek justice and mercy for others, to forgive and ask forgiveness of others. And once we have a stable, healthy sense of who we are; once we relax the grip of our addictions to sensations, to approval, to escapism, or to control; once we are made sufficiently whole and brought out of separation into community, *then* we can begin sharing the love of God with others who are experiencing rejection, suffering and death.

And because we helped them to see God's love, they too will experience resurrection.

There's a reason that Episcopalians and other Christians make the sign of the cross. The physical prayer reminds us that we are *internalizing* the life of Jesus Christ – his incarnation, his passion and his resurrection, making them our own.

In his book titled, "The Sign of the Cross," Andreas Andreopoulos wrote this: "The summation of the life of Jesus in the symbol and the sign of the cross is not meant so much as an act of 'taking up' the cross, as it is of 'taking the cross inside.' The direction of the sign of the cross is inward, which suggests embracing and internalizing the life of Jesus. Nevertheless, this inward direction suggests that, starting with the historical events of the life of Jesus, we live these events here and now, appropriating them outside time and space, as we become one with the timeless Christ." (How Orthodox is that?)

And so, if and when you practice this gesture, let it be a real sign of the cross. Instead of a small gesture that looks as though we are ashamed, we can make a confident sign that covers our whole bodies from forehead to stomach, from shoulder to shoulder and then resting on our hearts.

Instead of an absent-minded motion that looks as though we have learned the moves but not the meaning, we can focus our attention and make a sign of the cross that consciously includes our whole selves – our minds, our souls and our lives.

Then we can lose them in God. We can give them to God, as we say in Rite One of the Eucharist, to be "reasonable, holy and living sacrifices." And as we offer ourselves back to God at this table, God's grace consecrates and sanctifies us, and makes us one body with Jesus, the Anointed, "that he may dwell in us, and we in him."

Now, then. Who do you say that you are?

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