

“A Case of Mistaken Identity”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
September 12, 2021 – Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 19
James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

Who am I? Who are we? These are questions of identity that we ask ourselves in times of reflection, such as the time we find ourselves in this week, 20 years after the events of 9/11. We ask: Who are we as a nation? What have we become? And what are we becoming?

We ask the same questions of ourselves and our community as we gather here as a church on this Rally Day. Because of the pandemic, it's been two years since we last gathered here for a Rally Sunday, and our experiences over these last two years have formed us into something different than we were before. So we ask: Who are we now as a community of faith? And, in this new school year, what is God calling us to do?

In today's gospel lesson from Mark, we find Jesus and his disciples discussing some of the same questions of identity. Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" and "Who do you say that I am?" Prior to this moment, the disciples had followed Jesus for some time, traveling with him and witnessing him teaching, healing, and performing all sorts of miracles, so, based on their experiences with Jesus, they were in a pretty good position to answer these questions. Peter, ever eager to lead the group of disciples, answers for them, telling Jesus who they have come to understand him to be, replying, "You are the Messiah" (or Christ in the Greek translation of Mark).

Peter gets it right when identifying Jesus as the Messiah. However, Jesus immediately instructs him and the others to keep this secret, which is a motif that recurs throughout the gospel of Mark. But why should they have kept this a secret? After all, isn't it good news that Jesus is the Messiah among us? And shouldn't the disciples have been instructed to shout this good news from the mountaintops and the rooftops?

They certainly could have done so, but if they did, Jesus' life and ministry likely would have come to a much swifter -- and just as violent -- conclusion than it did. For a Messiah was a military hero, one dedicated by anointing to liberate people

by conquering those who held power over them. In the day of Jesus, the Roman empire had power over the people, having recently conquered the land of Palestine and incorporating it into their empire. Today's gospel lesson takes place in a region called Caesarea Philippi, that was a town built by Rome after their conquest on an older town and was the center of activity and power for the Romans in the region north of the Sea of Galilee. The Romans conquered and maintained power by ruthless use of force, and they certainly would have killed anyone claiming to be a military deliverer and a threat to their maintenance of power and order. A killing of a messiah would have been especially swift in a town and region where the Roman presence was concentrated, as it was in Caesarea Philippi. And so Jesus tells the disciples to be quiet about his identity as Messiah because he had a life to continue living had much work to continue doing.

He also knew that what Peter meant by claiming that he was the Messiah, and what the Romans and Herods, kings installed by Rome to maintain their rule, would have understood by that term, was actually far from who he actually was. Yes, he was the Messiah, but he was not a military deliverer, who would storm the walled city of Jerusalem at the head of a band of armed troops. He would not rid the people of Palestine of the tyrannical rule of Rome and the Herods. Nor would he overthrow the Temple and its priests or other religious leaders, who also held tightly to the power they had over people.

No, Jesus was a Messiah who would deliver people from their brokenness and waywardness, showing people how to live lives of wholeness and goodness -- lives full of love and peace -- even while enduring the oppressive rule of others. Jesus came to set us free from our oppressive ways of selfishness by showing us how to love sacrificially.

So Peter's exclamation that Jesus was the Messiah was correct, but it was a case of mistaken identity. As Jesus talked about what it meant for him to be the one who would deliver people by his loving sacrifice, Peter set out to correct Jesus. For in Peter's estimation, suffering and giving one's life away are not things the Messiah should do! And suffering and giving one's life away are not things that the followers of the Messiah should do, especially not Peter, who as the leader of the Messiah's followers should gain great power over people once the bad guys

are vanquished and the new Realm is established. Peter mansplained all of this to Jesus. So Jesus had a need to set Peter, the other disciples, and the crowds around them straight: This Messiah came not to conquer through violence, but through sacrificial love, and those who follow Jesus are to do the same.

Let there be no mistake about our identity this morning! Who are we? We are followers of the Messiah who selflessly gave his life in love. What are we called to do? We are called to selflessly give of ourselves just as Jesus did.

And so we are guided by our identity and calling this Rally Day and all the days of rallying together that lie before us. Selfless love is our common cause, and it should be demonstrated by us in all aspects of the life we share as a congregation, from our speech, as we are taught by the good but challenging words of Brother James, to the works of our hands, to how we put all of our resources to work.

So as we rally here at the First Congregational Church in Stoneham, consider how the ministries you are engaged in are guided by active love. Whether your ministry is to serve on a board or committee, to sing in the choir, to teach our children, to help us keep our ministry-enabling facilities functioning, to help us to gather in worship, to help broadcast our message of love, or just to join us in praising the God of love, consider how you can do your work with more of God's selfless love. Consider how you can lift up all of the other ministries of this church through your love. And consider how you can help change the world outside these walls, which is deeply in need of transformation, by your love. This day, may the church of God be blessed by love, and may you bring the blessing of love to others. Amen.