

Mark 8:27-38

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev Samantha Evans

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Who Do You Say That I Am?

My earliest memories of church are a mixture of Catholic rituals that I didn't understand but pretended to because I was there with friends from school. And the children's bell choir at a Presbyterian Church my grandma attended, and I somehow got involved in.

For many of us, growing up, church was just kind of a given. It was part of our cultural traditions and life together. Our parents went or our friends, so we did too. After school programs and mission trips were fun extracurriculars. Christmas and Easter were exciting communal celebrations.

And also, for many of us, somewhere along the line we became aware of what we were doing in church and why we were there. We began to think about what felt right and what felt off. And ultimately, we were faced with a choice to go or not to go.

If you're like me, you may have stopped going when you left your parents' home. I basically lived at my church, by my own volition, throughout all of middle and high school. But, when I went off to college, church kind of fell by the wayside.

That may or may not surprise you, given my vocation, but growing up, I went to church because I liked to be there. I had friends and mentors who loved me. I had community. I had purpose.

And so when I went off to college, I still needed to fulfill these basic, fundamental needs for belonging and purpose, I just sought this out through fellow students and college groups and projects. And you know the truth is, I never really found my niche, my real place. Don't get me wrong, I loved hanging out with my fellow physics phriends, solving complex calculus problems and playing with liquid nitrogen in the basement.

I made dear friends, and learned a lot about the world and myself.

But I never really felt that deep sense of unconditional belonging, I didn't find that again until I went to Seminary. And so now, as I think about church. Why I'm here, why I do this, a lot of it comes down to my deep desire for belonging and connection and purpose.

I do frequently come back to these questions: why are we here? What are we doing? Partly because I'm a reformed theologian through and through, and I think it is super important that we be always reforming.

But also because my heart is broken all of the time when the church universal falls deadly short of the vision for belonging and connection and purpose, which I believe God desires for all of us. Which I believe are like food and water. We cannot live without it.

We feel the most whole and loved and worthy when we have somewhere to belong. When we are surrounded by people who care for and about us. When our dreams, our lives, our gifts matter. When we matter.

Consider your own life. The spaces and people and times in your life where you felt whole. Where you felt loved and welcomed, unconditionally. Do you not yearn to feel that all the time? For yourself, for those you love? I know I do.

Consider now not just your life and those closest to you, but the lives of those you pass throughout your day.

Do you not yearn for care and security for folk you see asking for money outside the grocery store? Those living in tents along the road? Do you not yearn for home and community for those being displaced from their homelands because of violence?

Do you not yearn for those who have been forgotten, discarded, deemed disposable to be welcomed back into the fold? Do you not yearn for them to belong?

If you do yearn for these things, the question becomes what are you willing to do about it? What are you willing to do, what are you willing to sacrifice, what are you willing to pay in order for these things to happen?

Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" And they get that he is the Messiah, the one to bring about liberation, but they, or at least Peter, fails to realize what that means and how they will get there.

If any want to become my followers, says Jesus, 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?

These words from Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, the blessed one sent to proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God, these words are not nice life goals. They make up a radical, deeply challenging, terrifying calling for the people of God, the people who would seek to follow this Christ and live into this kingdom he proclaims has come near.

I had a professor in seminary who said that for the most part, we like “pocket Jesus.”¹ A Jesus that is small enough to fit in our pocket. Who is conveniently always within our reach, always within our control. We don’t like the radical, controversial Jesus. The one who brings outcasts to dinner. Who disrupts our beloved traditions. Who suffers in solidarity with the oppressed and calls us to do the same.

This Jesus doesn’t follow membership trends. His mission is not easily budgeted for. He cannot be contained within our sanctuaries, let alone our pockets.

This Jesus is on the move. He is pushed boundaries, tearing down walls, and risking, and ultimately sacrificing his life in order to bring about the kingdom of God.

We are here, the gathered body of Christ, called and commissioned to follow this Jesus. To welcome weirdos and outcasts into the fold. To experiment and make space for new people and new rituals. To challenge and dismantle systems of oppression wherever we encounter them. And to do so by listening to those who are victims of these systems.

The church is called to proclaim the good news to the poor and the oppressed. To break every chain and carve space for all of God’s beloved to belong, to live and thrive and have joy.

The church is called to risk even its own life in order for the kingdom to be made known.

For those of you feeling like you don’t belong or those of you feeling adrift without purpose or connection: know that you are beloved children of the Most High God. You are an important member of Christ’s body. You deserve to be whole and to know joy. And our God will stop at nothing to make it so.

¹ Dr. Yolanda Pierce

For those of you feeling anxious, perturbed by the changes that are happening all around us, weary of the sacrifices we are being called to make, afraid of what the future of our community, our church might look like, I ask you:

Do you believe that the kingdom of God has come near? Do you believe that peace is possible? That you can be whole? Do you believe that enemies can be reconciled? That the prisons can be emptied?

Do you believe that it is possible to house every single person and provide enough food and water for all?

Do you believe that God is making all things new, including us? And bringing about beauty and joy beyond our wildest imagination?

Do you?

Maybe you do. Maybe sometimes you don't. Maybe you can only manage to want to.

I'm asking y'all, actually begging y'all to try. Because honestly, none of this matters if we are not willing to stake our lives on it. To risk everything, even our lives to follow Jesus, the Christ. I will tell you from experience, my friends, that this kind of life is truly the only one worth living. It's who we are. Who we were created to be. Let it be so.

In the name of the Triune God, who creates, sustains, and redeems us all. Amen.