

Holding Our Tongues
Mark 8:27 – 38; James 3:1 – 12
Sunday, September 16, 2018

Have you ever spoken from a place of misunderstanding, where you were convinced you knew what you were talking about, but you really didn't?

I remember this one time in my first semester of seminary, I was in a class where we were talking about the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament. The professor said something that, for whatever reason, I disagreed with; I don't even remember what it *was*. So I interjected something, and the professor said, "No, that's not quite right." Well, I was embarrassed, so naturally, I dug in deeper. I started arguing with him about why I was *right*. I remember making all these points (that I thought were *really great*) about Paul's context when he wrote this letter. The professor was listening very patiently and would occasionally interject a, "No..." but I just kept going. I kept pushing harder. Finally I said, "I really think that's what Paul was trying to say here." The professor paused for a moment, looked at me, and said, "Paul didn't *write* Hebrews." To which I replied, brilliantly, "What do you mean?" He said, "I mean just that. He didn't write it. No one has ever said that he did."

I was *so embarrassed*, in front of all of my classmates. My whole argument was shot down because I had no idea what I was talking about. I would have been better off not saying anything, just keeping my mouth shut, listening, and learning.

Now, it would have been fine if that was the *only* time something like that ever happened to me. But it wasn't. I can remember times in high school, college, and plenty of other times in seminary where I embarrassed myself because I did not know what I was talking about, but I *thought* that I *did*. That has been one of the hardest lessons for me in becoming a pastor –

learning to *listen* more than I *speak*. Learning to *ask questions*. Knowing what I don't know – and being okay with saying, “I don't know; help me understand.” Knowing when to speak and when to keep my mouth shut. Knowing that there is so much I still need to *learn*.

Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” “Some people say that you're John the Baptist. Some say that you're Elijah. Others say that you're one of the prophets.” Their answer reflects that people really don't *know* who Jesus truly is. So Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do *you* say that I am?” Peter jumps in right away and says, “You're the Messiah!” A lot of times, we hear this as one of those rare moments when the disciples finally get it right. They may not know *much*, but Peter knows that Jesus is the Messiah. Except Peter doesn't really understand what he's talking about.

The word *messiah* in Hebrew literally means “anointed.” To be *anointed* refers to the ceremony in which oil was poured on the head of a prophet or king to show that they had been chosen by God for a special task.¹ The way that the Jewish people *understood* the Messiah was that he would be a royal figure from the lineage of King David who would come to free Israel from their Gentile oppressors.² The Messiah would raise up an army, defeat the Romans, and restore Israel's independence. Then he would sit on a throne and rule as king, like David did.

That's what Peter is thinking about when he says, “You are the Messiah.” *That's* what he would have been taught all his life. He is saying, “You are the powerful king who will lead us to victory over the Romans and restore the kingdom to Israel.” But nothing in Jesus' life or ministry thus far has given any indication that *that's* who he is or what he's about. He has never *claimed* up to now in Mark's gospel to be the Messiah. In fact right after Peter says that he is the

¹ Eugene Boring & Fred Craddock, *The People's New Testament Commentary*, pg. 145

² Elisabeth Johnson, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3778

Messiah, Jesus doesn't *refer* to himself as the Messiah, he refers to himself as the "Son of Man." A very *different* title. He has not made any claims to royalty or shown any political ambitions.³ Peter *thinks* he knows what he's talking about. But his answer reflects that he doesn't really know who Jesus truly is. And so the next thing Jesus says is that he orders them not to tell anyone about him. "Don't go speaking out of your own misunderstanding and creating these false expectations among others. You're better off just keeping your mouths shut."

Jesus *tries* to tell them who he really is and what he's really about. It says, "He began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected and killed." He's saying, "I'm not going to be this powerful king who leads an army to victory. I'm actually going to suffer and die." But that doesn't line up with their understanding of who the Messiah *is*. That's not the way this is supposed to *go*. The Messiah is supposed to *conquer* the Romans, not be *killed* by them. What good is a dead Messiah?⁴ They're thinking one thing, but Jesus is talking about something else.

So Peter takes him aside and rebukes him. That word *rebuke*, the Greek word for it here literally means, "to charge or order." Mark uses it elsewhere to talk about Jesus ordering a demon to come out of a person or ordering a storm to stop. It was used in verse 30 when Jesus "strictly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone about him." So Peter here is giving Jesus his orders! He's saying, "No, *this* is what you're here for! *This* is what you have come to do! *This* is what you're supposed to be about!" Peter's response is totally understandable based on traditional Jewish expectations of the Messiah. And don't we *all* want a Savior who is strong and powerful and will rescue us from our troubles and defeat our enemies?⁵

³ Elisabeth Johnson, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3778

⁴ Elisabeth Johnson, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3778

⁵ Elisabeth Johnson, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3778

But Jesus says to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” We *get* the second half of that. He’s setting his mind not on *divine* things but on *human* things, on his human understanding and expectations of who the Messiah is and what the Messiah is supposed to do. But that first part – “Get behind me, Satan!” – seems a little harsh.

A lot of times we understand this as Jesus saying, “Get out of my way,” or just, “Shut up.” But when Jesus says, “Get behind me,” it’s the Greek word *opiso*, and he actually says that several other times in Mark’s gospel, and he has actually said it before to *Peter*. Back in chapter one, when Jesus is first starting out, it says he passed along the Sea of Galilee and saw Peter and his brother Andrew fishing, and he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” That *follow me* is the Greek word *opiso* that literally means, “get behind me.” A few verses later, Jesus sees James and John in a boat mending their nets. He calls them, and it says they left their father, and they followed him. That phrase *followed him* is *opiso*. They got behind him. And right after Jesus says this to Peter, the very next thing he says is, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross....” *Become my followers* is *opiso*. “If any want to get behind me....”

This isn’t just Jesus being mean or rude. He is calling Peter back to discipleship. He is saying, “You don’t really understand who I am, so you need to get back *behind* me and start *following* me again instead of trying to lead me where *you* think I should be going.” How often do we want God to meet *our* expectations, bless *our* plans, and go along with *our* will? To *us*, Jesus says, “You need to get behind me, *follow* me, set your sights on *me*. Stop trying to make me go

where you think I should go. *Listen* to me and *learn* from me about where I am trying to *lead* you.”

James actually picks up on this in our other scripture reading. He writes, “Not many of you should become teachers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” Well, if you’re not a *teacher*, what are you? You’re a *student*. A *disciple*. You’re *learning*. You’re not *leading*, you’re *following*. Then he goes off about how we can’t control our tongues. The tongue is a *fire*, it’s a *world of iniquity*, it’s a wild animal that cannot be *tamed*, it is a *restless evil, full of deadly poison*. James paints a pretty pessimistic picture here – that we are absolutely unable to control our tongues when we speak. We are going to misspeak, to say something wrong (either willfully or out of our ignorance), to boast or curse or say something that hurts someone else. He says all of us make mistakes, and there’s really nothing we can do about it.

The solution, for James, is not to be a *teacher*, but to be a *student*, a *disciple*. Not to *lead*, but to *follow*. Not to *speak*, but to *listen*, to *learn*. Just like Jesus told Peter to stop talking (because he didn’t really understand who Jesus was), get behind him, follow him, and learn from him, so James calls us to hold our tongues until we really learn and understand who Jesus is, and then speak from that place.

We live in a world of talking heads and constant spin, where everyone insists that they are right and try to speak from a place of power and authority. As followers of Jesus, maybe we can show the world a different way of being by *listening* more than we *speak*. Jesus and James both call us to deny ourselves, to deny our impulse to speak until we can speak from an understanding of who Christ truly is and what Christ is about. They call us to humble ourselves, to follow Christ,

listen to Christ, learn from Christ, to be *disciples*. Disciples do not follow their *own* will. They submit themselves to the will of their teacher. It means we deny our own impulses – whether to speak or to act – and listen for what *God* is calling us to do. And Jesus is calling us to take up our cross and follow him; to lose our lives for his sake. That means putting his will and priorities ahead of our own comfort and security; losing our lives by spending them for others – using our time and energy, our gifts and resources so that others might experience God’s love made known in Jesus Christ.⁶

“Who do you say that I am?” That is the central question of a life of faith. As followers of Jesus, everything we *do* and *say*, the way we treat others, our economics, our politics, all of it should be driven by our answer to that question, our understanding of who Jesus Christ is. Because when we understand *that*, we will understand who he calls *us* to be. But *until* we understand that, perhaps what we are called to do is to be humble and quiet, to get behind Christ and follow him and listen and learn.

⁶ Elisabeth Johnson, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3778