

“Our Generation’s Turn”
Mark 8:27-38
Sesquicentennial Rally Day

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The disciples are on the road with Jesus when he asks them a simple question: “Who do people say that I am?” They all jump in to answer: “Some say you’re John the Baptist, raised from the dead. Some say you’re the prophet Elijah returned as Scripture promises. Some say you’re among one of the prophets.” That was easy for them. They could all repeat what other people were saying.

Then Jesus asks them a follow up question: “Who do you say that I am?” Only one, only Peter, answers him. “You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” All the rest were silent.

It’s easy to repeat what other people are thinking. It’s harder, much harder, to claim exactly what we know. We’re not exactly sure, and we don’t want to offend anyone, and we especially don’t want to look stupid. What if we’re wrong? What if we say the wrong thing?

Well, what if? Peter says the wrong thing all the time, sometimes in the same breath. Peter gets it right about Jesus being the Christ, the Messiah. But when Jesus starts in with talk of suffering, Peter takes him aside to correct him. Cheeky, huh? “Jesus, sir, you’ve got this wrong.” Jesus in turn rebukes him – in fact he does it publicly so the other disciples can get the same lesson.

And then notice what happens. Peter doesn’t angrily defend his point. Peter doesn’t slink away and disappear. Peter doesn’t even shut up about his faith and convictions – in fact, he gets it wrong a few more times along the way. No, this is what Peter does: whether he gets it right, or gets it wrong, he keeps on following Jesus, and he keeps on claiming what he knows.

Every person in every generation of the church has the same choice to make about our faith in Jesus Christ. When push comes to shove we can report what other people believe. We can go along with the crowd. We can

play it safe and keep our mouths shut. Or like Peter we can claim what we believe, even if we get it half-right.

One hundred and fifty years ago, our founders' generation faced the same option. I used to think that it was different then, that everybody was pious, confident about their faith and able to speak of it freely. I've found that that is so not true. When our church was founded, it turns out, most people would go along with the crowd. I suppose it's human nature to fit in. I love the way original founder D. R. Holt described those early years. He described the "young, bustling" city of Chicago as filled with people, most of them Christians, and most of whom went along with the crowd. "Striving to get the most out of life," making their "friendship in demand," or simply out to accumulate the most money they could get their hands on. But there were a few, Holt discovered, who were ready to make a different claim as they followed Jesus Christ. They believed Christ called them to help others, to encourage the "elevation of character, integrity, and honor," especially among the young.¹ He himself, an exceedingly successful lumber baron, claimed his faith openly, as a respected elder, generous benefactor, courageous leader in the Underground Railroad, beloved Sunday School teacher, and a determined founder of this congregation.

Our forebears in this place – they could have disappeared in the crowd, but instead they dared to claim Jesus, with whatever partial knowledge they had. Some knew him and claimed him as their personal Savior whose tender compassion rescued them from death. Some knew him and claimed him as the Good Teacher whose wisdom they wanted to share, especially with the next generation. Some knew him and claimed him as the sovereign Lord whose marching orders reshaped justice. Some knew him and claimed him as the Son of God whose majesty inspired this sanctuary. But each of them dared to claim what they knew about Jesus. Together, their courage and conviction – even when half-right – led them to build this church and its schools in this place. And the good that's come of it, the lives changed, spirits healed, children trained, families strengthened, hospitals built here and around the

world, mission done in Korea and China and Persia, in Chicago and North Chicago – the impact of their choice is endless.

It's our turn now, our turn to answer Jesus' question. "Who do you say that I am?" We can say what we think the crowd believes. We can say what we think we're supposed to believe. We can sit on our hands silently, and avoid being wrong altogether. Or – even if we're only partly right – even, if like Peter we're sometimes dead wrong - we can dare to claim what we know of Jesus Christ. Our Savior. Our Teacher. Our Lord. And if we don't know him yet, it is not too late. Today is a great day to start.

What difference does it make what we believe about Jesus? What difference does it make, what we claim is true? I'll tell you what difference it makes. The precious babies whom we baptized today: it makes a difference to them ... and it will make a difference to their children, and their children's children, and to all the generations still to come. One hundred and fifty years from now, when people gather in this place, may they be able to say of us that we knew Jesus, and we claimed him as our Lord. Amen.

ⁱ Holt scrapbook, Chicago History Museum