

## “Answering the Question”

Mark 8: 27-30

Liz Miller

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This summer, as many of you know, I spent the month of July in Chicago, taking classes at Second City, which is known for training and shaping some of the world’s most famous comedians and Saturday Night Live actors. My offer letter hasn't come in to audition for SNL yet, but meanwhile I came home with a lot of new improv skills. If you don't know much about improv, it mainly consists of writing sketches and playing theatre games.

One of my favorite games that we played is called the comma game. Two people went in front of the class and were given a suggestion from the audience. They began improvising a scene, making it up as they went along. Out of nowhere, our teacher would say COMMA! And then they would have to take the last word of phrase that they said, and say the same thing in different words. Sometimes this happened more than once.

For example, if you were improvising a scene, you might say to your partner, “I want to go to the movies.” COMMA! “I want to go to the cinema.” COMMA! “I want to go to the room where people sit in cushy chairs and watch a film.” COMMA! “I want to go to the place with the overpriced popcorn and the big moving pictures.” We would pause and look at our teacher expectantly after each time we reworded the phrase, waiting to see if we had to keep going. Usually he only said COMMA! Two or three times, but sometimes it went on, and on, and on.

This game was fun, but it was also a challenge. When I was in the hot spot, it forced me to be very specific about my language. It helped me understand that the words we use and the way we describe things are very important—changing your language can change the course of a conversation. Using one description over another can alter the way someone interprets what you've said. It reminded

me that language matters, and that there is always more than one way of saying something.

Today's reading from Mark reminded me of the coma game. Imagine, if you will, that instead of the Gospel of Mark, we heard the same story over again from the Gospel According to Improv:

Jesus and his disciples are walking down the road towards the villages of Caesarea Philippi. They've been walking for a few miles. The sun is hot and the road is dusty. They are getting tired and the disciples are starting to whine. Not wanting to lose morale, Jesus has a brilliant idea, as he so often does. He says, "Disciples! Disciples! Who wants to play a game?" Right away, they began to perk up, curious what he might mean. Next, Jesus asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" They reply, "We know this! John the baptist." Jesus yells, "COMMA!" and the disciples shout, "Elijah!" "COMMA!" and they quickly say, "One of the prophets!"

Satisfied, Jesus continues his question game, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter takes the challenge: "You are the messiah." Jesus again shouts, "COMMA!" and Peter says, "You are the Son of God!" "COMMA!" "You are my Savior!" "COMMA!" "You are the holiest of holies! The bread of life! The Lord! The lamb of God! Immanuel!" Out of breath, Peter bends down with his hands on his knees and looks up at Jesus, hoping he is satisfied with his answers. Jesus pauses. He looks Peter in the eyes, holds his gaze, and whispers....."comma!" At this point Peter pretends not to hear him and quickly says, "Oh look the other disciples left us behind! Better catch up!" and away he runs, all the way to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Thus ends the reading of the Gospel According to Improv.

"Who do you say that I am?" It's a simple question, but one that is incredibly important to the disciples. Who they understood Jesus to be changed their lives. If they had thought Jesus was a nice carpenter, they wouldn't have laid down their fishing nets to follow him. If they had thought Jesus was an eclectic wanderer who could tell a good story, they wouldn't have left their families and the comfort of their lives to spread his radical message of God's Good News. Their answer to that one simple question determined what their life of discipleship would entail. It's a question that each one of them had to be able to fully answer and understand in order to even understand what being a disciples meant.

Jesus understood that this question has to be answered before his friends could truly take up a life of discipleship. In the verses following our reading, Jesus explains to them what their answer means. He says, “If you believe I am the messiah, this is what that looks like. There will come a day when I will be betrayed. And then I will be killed. And then I will rise again. And if you are to follow me, if you are to follow the messiah, you must understand this so that you can come on this journey with me. So that you can be my disciples not just through the good moments, but through the difficult times ahead as well.” When the disciples had an answer to this question, why they could say confidently, “This is who we say you are” it was only then that they were able to go deeper in their relationship with Jesus.

This is the question that everyone—whether you are a 1<sup>st</sup> century villager or a 21<sup>st</sup> century suburbanite—who wants to journey on that path of discipleship must answer. Discipleship looks different on each one of us. And, in order to understand what it might look like for ourselves, we have to start with being able to articulate who Jesus is for us, in our own personal lives. Different disciples have different answers to that same question from Jesus. “Who do you say that I am?”

Paul the Apostle said that Jesus was the evangelist son of God, and so his life of discipleship was in forming new faith communities, evangelizing and bringing even more people to God. Martin Luther believed that Jesus was a man of infinite grace and forgiveness, so his life of discipleship was forming a new church, one where people could not buy their way into heaven. Rosa Parks believed that Jesus said, “The last shall be first and the first shall be last,” and her life of discipleship led her to refusing to sit in the back of the bus. Caesar Chavez believed that Jesus was someone who defended those who were too weak to defend themselves, and so his life of discipleship became fighting for the rights of impoverished farm workers.

For those of us who follow Jesus, it makes a difference who we think he was or what he stood for. There are dozens, maybe hundreds, of possible answers. Not every answer will fit for every person, but when you come to a place of understanding what Jesus means to you, and discipleship begins to

take root. When you can look at his life and his legacy from a particular lens, it helps our own future take shape. It helps us focus our ministry. It helps give us meaning in our day to day lives.

For example, if, in answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" you say that Jesus was a steward of God's resources who wanted others to give their money to the poor, you might find yourself giving generously to charities in our community or joining South Church's stewardship team. If you say that Jesus was someone who welcomed children wherever he went, you might volunteer reading to children in an after-school program or inviting a family with young children to share a pew with you during worship. If you say that Jesus was a living embodiment of resurrection and our proof that life can overcome death, you might find yourself reaching out to someone who is grieving the loss of a loved one, offering steady friendship and love as a sign that life is still present and that hope will one day return to them.

If I'm going to be really honest, I want you to know that without an answer to that one question, our live as disciples cannot fully take shape. When we don't have a clear understanding of who Jesus is for us or what following him means for us, I believe that is when we find ourselves volunteering for ministries that, while they may be worthwhile, leave us unsatisfied. That is when we find ourselves asking, "Why am I doing this?" I believe that when we go through the motions because we are supposed to but we don't know what it really means to us, we are at risk of burning out with no wellspring to drink from to re-nourish ourselves. But when we understand why, when we understand the meaning something carries for us, when we can give an answer to who Jesus is for us, things begin to shift and take form.

Earlier this week, when I was cleaning out a box of mementos and photos, I found a journal that I had written twelve years ago. It was from my time volunteering at Koinonia Farm in South Georgia, a time when I was actively trying to answer the question, "WHAT AM I GOING TO DO WITH THE REST OF MY LIFE?" As I read through the journal, I remembered that was the week I had the realization that Jesus was someone who lived in community and helped nurture the community around

him.

Jesus' ministry was not one of isolation or loneliness, it was one of partnership with his disciples, working together to feed the poor, to tell stories of God, and to right injustices that were prevalent in their society. That was a Jesus I could understand. Once I realized that Jesus was a man of community, I knew that I wanted to spend my life like him, in community. It's an answer to the question that began to shape my next twelve years as I found that community in churches, in ordained ministry, and finally in South Church. My own journey of discipleship could not have begun until I could answer that question.

When I found my answer, I found my truth. It's not that my truth was any better than someone else's truth. For me, Jesus was a man of community. For others, Jesus is a man of endless compassion. For some, Jesus is one who stands with the oppressed. For most of us, we could give you five different answers, and they would all speak to some truth within us. And for most of us, our answer will evolve over time and our sense of discipleship or following Jesus will also evolve. "Who do you say that I am?" is a question with many true and right answers, but it is a question that still must be answered.

The answer that we give have given have meaning for us if we are going to follow Jesus. Our answers carry great weight if we want to find focus in our ministry or service to the church or service to God. But above all else, remember this: no one else can answer for you. No one else can decide what Jesus means to you—either his life or his resurrection or his ministry or his miracles. It is a question we must answer for ourselves and in answering, give shape to our call as disciples. Amen.