

Isaiah 50:4-9a  
James 3:1-12  
Mark 8:27-38

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There are times we complain about the increasingly secular nature of our culture. On the other hand, we can't help but notice the increased diversity of religions which have become a part of our society. Christianity may still be the largest faith community in America, but we shouldn't presume a person's expression of faith when someone says he or she is religious.

As a Christian, I believe a person is most blessed in knowing Jesus as Lord in one's life. I don't mean this in condemnation toward people of other religions. They are still God's children, and many seek a relationship with our Creator. I find myself wondering if anything you and I say or do somehow reveals the best portrait in knowing God is found in Jesus.

I'm troubled by the increased secularity and challenged by the wider diversity of religion because it seems Christians are not fulfilling our calling as witnesses to our Lord. We should care about the salvation of other people, not as judgment, but as compassion. We honor how God allows everyone to make choices, and should show hospitality and tolerance toward any who demonstrate a respect for guidelines expressed in the Ten Commandments.

Perhaps it's a healthy thing for you and me to feel like we are part of a minority. We shouldn't assume everybody knows about Jesus. Besides, more than simply knowing about Him, people need to know Jesus, forming a personal relationship with Christ.

When the disciples started to follow Jesus, they were intrigued by what He said and by what He could do. Sometimes Jesus had the answers they were looking for in their spiritual quest. Other times, He made them think of questions they had never thought about before. Was He their teacher? Was He their leader? Was Jesus the friend they could trust the most?

This gets us into today's Gospel story. In the region of Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked those two classic questions: the first – "Who do people say that I am?" and the second – "But who do you say that I am?" Those are the core issues in forming a faith relationship with Jesus. We need to plug into the witnesses of other people, becoming a listening post, praying for spiritual discernment in evaluating what we hear from others. Most important is the realization of what you believe about Jesus in your life's witness. Faith is a journey which lasts a lifetime, and it may at times feel like a roller coaster ride.

For the disciple Peter, his declaration to Jesus was definitely a high point, answering: "I say you are the Messiah!" There would be many times he would step forth in faith, and other times he would cower in fear and confusion. Let me explain something about the setting: Caesarea Philippi. Israel was an occupied country. It had been conquered many times, brought to its knees by foreign oppressors. This northern region had become the center of Baal worship and those who worshipped the Greek god, Pan. The region was filled with monuments to the Roman emperor, Caesar, who was believed to be a god. Everywhere Jesus and His disciples looked, they were confronted by another temple dedicated to some deity or another. It was in this setting where Peter came to faith and spoke his first witness.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus responds with great joy, saying "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you. It is heaven sent. I shall call you Peter, which means 'Rock,' and upon this rock I will build My church and all the powers of hell shall not prevail against it." The Christian church is built upon the testimony how Jesus is the Christ.

Jesus began to teach the disciples much more about their journey of faith, revealing when He must undergo great suffering and rejection, saying He would be killed and yet would rise again. Peter gets upset with this, and begins to protest and rebuke Jesus for saying such things. But Peter is about to take quite a plunge. Jesus whirled around and said: "Get behind Me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things."

I wonder how often we get those two mixed up! We enjoy occasional worldly success, hoping we're wise, talented, and honorable. But God's ways may not match up, and perhaps we'll have suffer some before He has our attention.

Recently I was reading about Kurt Warner, a retired football quarterback. Last year in 2017, the Pro Football League inducted Kurt into their Hall of Fame, becoming the only player also inducted into Arena Football's Hall of Fame. Back in 1999, the NFL named Kurt as the most valuable player when the St. Louis Rams beat the Tennessee Titans in the Super Bowl. When Mike Tirico from ABC interviewed him, he said, "Kurt, first things first — tell me about the final touchdown pass to Isaac." Kurt responded: "Well, first things first, I've got to thank my Lord and Savior up above — thank you, Jesus!" Kurt did the same thing to Terry Bradshaw from Fox News nine years later when Kurt led the Arizona Cardinals to the Super Bowl. Was this witness due to the blessings of his athletic success? Kurt claims it's not the case.

You see, Kurt Warner came to faith after seeing how his wife, Brenda, handled heartbreaks with such grace and peace. He knew Brenda's parents had been killed when a tornado struck their home. Then Brenda's baby boy, Zachary, suffered permanent brain damage when he was accidentally dropped. Kurt was so impressed by his wife's faith that he also gave his life to Jesus. Now he takes every chance he can get to tell others about Christ. Kurt even printed his own football trading cards, featuring the story of the day he turned his life over to Christ so he would have something meaningful to give people who ask for his autograph. Kurt knows the answer to the Jesus' question: "Who do you say that I am?"

Think about it. Are you inspired by success, or by sacrifice? Do you admire people who seem to have it made, or those who make the best out of adverse conditions? Would you listen to what Kurt Warner has to say because of his celebrity status, or the status of his faith? Might we learn more from the tough times than from Easy Street, sensing Christ's presence through those who suffer more than those who are celebrities? Too many celebrities abuse their status.

Think of yourself as a minority, in a culture which doesn't know Jesus except as a curse word, or a competitive brand of religion. You're surrounded by idols and icons which obscure the word of God. Can you hear the voice of Christ asking: "But who do you say that I am?" Others will be listening to your answer in what you say and do.

Amen.