

## I Call for the Question

Mark 8: 27-36

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Tony Robbins may be the male equivalent to Oprah Winfrey in this country. He says the quality of our life is determined by the quality of the questions we ask. One of his famous examples is, “Look at the worst thing that’s ever happened to you and ask ‘How is this the best thing that’s ever happened to me?’” He believes that if we ask, “Why did this happen to me?” or “Why am I so unlucky?” that it is the wrong question which will lead us down a wrong road.

Haven’t you often heard that asking the right question is just as important as the right answer?

Fred Buechner, a novelist and spiritual writer, once wrote that these are among our most important questions:

- If you had only one last message to leave to a handful of people who are the most important to you, what would it be, in twenty-five words or less?
- Is there any person in the world, or any cause, that if the circumstances called for it, you would be willing to die for?
- If this were the last day of your life, what would you do with it?

The right questions are important. Right?

I

Today, we find ourselves in Caesarea Philippi, where the issue between Jesus and his disciples centers around the questions. The disciples have been with Jesus for some time. They have witnessed his preaching, teaching, healing and the amazing things he has done in the name of God. They know that he is not just some wise, holy man from Galilee.

So, Jesus pulls his disciples aside and asks them, “Who do people say that I am?” And they reply that people are saying he is one of the great prophets, maybe Elijah or even the now-beheaded John the Baptist come back from the grave.

This week I was at a presbytery meeting and the debate was getting long. Finally one of the elder commissioners addressed the moderator saying: “I call for the question.”

In Robert’s *Rules of Order*, when someone calls for the question, the debate ceases and the assembly votes on proceeding or not.

In essence, then at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus calls for the question. No more debate or discussion. He looks at the disciples and asks, “But who do you say that I am?”

It is a pivotal moment. And Peter blurts out, “You are the Messiah.”

## II

Who do you say that I am?

It was the question for the disciples. How they answered would determine their way forward and their relationship with Jesus.

Now you have heard me say: “The gospel is about relationships; everything else is a footnote.”

“Who do you say that I am?” Is a question about the relationships between Jesus and his disciples.

Now I don’t know how many wedding services I have presided over, but my share, and it is a privilege to be a part of such a significant time in a couple’s life and the lives of their families.

Along the way, however, I have had a few anxious parents say to me, “You make sure they know what they are getting into.”

As if I knew! As if any of us could ever know what we were getting into when we are married!

A Roman Catholic bishop was visiting one of his churches in the role of administering confirmation to the parish children. The children had been studying the Catholic catechism. The bishop asked one of the confirmands one of the catechism questions, “What is matrimony?”

But a young girl got confused. Instead of the answer for matrimony, she gave the bishop the catechism answer for “What is purgatory?”

“Matrimony is a state of terrible torment which those who enter it are compelled to undergo for a time to prepare them for a better and brighter world.”

This reminds me of the uncle who stands up at the rehearsal dinner to make a toast and says that marriage is a time of “trial, testing and tribulation.”

It is the anxiety of “Do they know what they are getting into?”

No one knows what we are getting into because no one knows what the future holds. No one knows how we will change, how our partner will change, how our circumstances will change or how the world will change.

The main thing in a marriage is that we are committing ourselves to a journey with the person we love, no matter where the journey leads, no matter what twists and turns arise. And if we are people of faith, we know this journey is also a spiritual journey... and that God’s presence is critical.

Jesus says, “Who do you say that I am?” It was not just a question for his disciples two millennia ago. It’s a question for us. Jesus is always asking us the question... here on Sunday, when we pray, when we are making an important life decision. “Who do you say that I am?”

Here’s the thing. With the question, Jesus is inviting us into a relationship, like marriage, where future is unknown. He is not inviting us into a system of beliefs or a set of rules. He is not inviting us to answer whether we believe in the virgin birth or if we understand the Trinity, or if we can articulate a theology of eschatology.

No, Jesus is inviting us into a relationship and to a commitment in this relationship. But, unlike marriage, it is not a relationship among equals. Jesus is the teacher; we are the student. Jesus is the leader; we are the follower. Jesus is the Messiah; we are the disciple. Jesus is the Lord; we are his servant. And he promises that if we enter this relationship, we will find a life of significance.

Is there anyone who does not want a life of significance?

### III

Jesus says that a life of significance begins with following him and then he says:

*If any want to become my followers, 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?*

Self-denial. Carrying a cross. He is describing a servant’s life...and, the great paradox that Jesus hopes we will discover is that in losing ourselves, we find ourselves.

Max Dupree, once the CEO of Herman Miller, maker of upscale office furniture, tells this story. “I arrived at a local sports tennis club just after a group of (high school) students had vacated the locker room. They had not bothered to pick up after themselves. Without thinking too much about it, I gathered up all their towels and put them in a hamper. A friend of mine quietly watched me do this and then asked me a question that I’ve pondered many times over the years. ‘Do you pick up towels because you’re the president of the company, or are you the president because you pick up towels?’”

That is the spirit of being a disciple of Jesus.

Being a servant, denying our self, taking up a cross – requires discipline. In fact the words *discipline* and *disciple* are from the same Latin word, *discipulus*, which means *a student who learns*.

Babe Dedrichson Zeharias was an Olympic star who won two gold medals in track and field at the 1932 Olympics. She then took up golf and became one of the great professional women golfers back in the 1940s/ ‘50s, winning ten professional events. She was asked by a reporter how she could hit a golf ball as she did, and she answered: “Simple. First you hit a thousand golf balls. You hit them until your hands bleed, and you can’t hit any more. The next day and the next and the next, you start over, and maybe a year later you might be able to play eighteen holes...and after that you play every day until the time finally arrives when you know what you are doing when you hit the ball.”

Discipline. Learning. Growing.

Last week you heard my grief over the teenagers shot and killed in Parkland Florida and my despair that these mass shootings keep happening. I shared with you that my journey during Lent would be a journey to understand more about gun violence, particularly as a spiritual issue. I want to know what it means to be a Christian in this debate... and how my faith, your faith, might lead me to think and act.

My journey includes a daily blog posted on our church webpage called *Sid’s Lenten Pilgrimage after Parkland*. Our tech staff tells me that over a thousand people are reading it... which means that many of you are also grappling with this madness.

Some of you have sent me copies of letters you have written to law makers. Others of you are sending me newspaper and magazine articles which I very much appreciate... both because you are helping me learn but also because I am feeling that I am not in this alone, that fellow spiritual travelers are joining me on this journey.

This week I have been particularly intrigued by the teenagers from Parkland who have offered their strong voices in the aftermath of the shootings and funerals. I have been following these students express their sorrow, fear and anger. I watched several students interviewed by a CBS reporter. I saw others speaking at a rally in Parkland. One hundred

students took a four and a half hour bus trip to Tallahassee to meet with the Florida legislature. A group of twenty (students and parents from Parkland) met with President Trump in what was called a “listening session.” A packed town hall meeting broadcast by CNN revealed poignant student questions directed at a panel that included politicians, the Parkland sheriff, and a spokeswoman from the National Rifle Association.

I hear a common theme: the Parkland students, who survived this shooting rampage, want the madness to stop; they want to lead the change that adults have been unable or unwilling to accomplish. Their raw emotions, their youthful idealism and passionate determination is vibrant and refreshing. These school kids feel that their lives are the most vulnerable... they wonder if one of their mentally deranged, depressed, loner, violent fellow students will again become unhinged and roam the school halls with an AR15.

Who knows if this is a sustainable movement or whether it will fizzle out as it did after Columbine, Virginia Tech, Newtown, Orlando and Las Vegas?

But for Christians, this issue, like all issues that get on our radar, has to be viewed through the lens of faith... not as a political issue, not as a war between cultures. No, our questions are

Is this a moral issue?

Is this a spiritual issue?

What would Jesus have me do?

I began this sermon with a focus on the importance of questions. And I will end with these questions:

- If any issue, not just gun violence, immigration, race relations, homelessness and poverty, becomes for us a matter of faith, what will it mean to carry the cross?
- When Jesus says his followers must deny themselves, what kind of self-denial or sacrifice are we willing to make?