



Roanoke, Virginia  
Commitment Sunday  
October 10, 2021

## ***“Reimagined: Confession”***

*Part V of the Sermon Series, “Reimagined.”*

*Mark 8:27-38*

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Our passage this morning is the hinge that holds together the two halves of Mark’s Gospel. At the Gospel’s beginning the narrator tells us, “The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.” Then we wait to find out who is going to learn what we already know:

- first, that Jesus is the long-awaited hero who will lead the Jewish people back to favored status as the Kingdom of God, and
- second, that Jesus is God’s son.

We will not hear anyone call Jesus the “Son of God” till the very end... or almost the very end. It happens at the cross after Jesus takes his last breath. But halfway through the Gospel, we hear a follower of Jesus finally calling him “the Christ”—“the Messiah”—the one who will deliver God’s chosen people, the Jews. It is a half-through moment that is halfway-true. Peter gives Jesus the title, but then proves he does not yet know what that title means.

Listen for Peter’s confession. And listen for what Jesus has to say to him... and maybe to us:



<sup>27</sup> Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” <sup>28</sup> And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” <sup>29</sup> He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” <sup>30</sup> And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

<sup>31</sup> Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup> But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

<sup>34</sup> He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> 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. <sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? <sup>37</sup> Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? <sup>38</sup> Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

You heard Peter’s confession. By “confession,” I do not mean *confession of sins*. Though admitting how one falls short of what God would have us think and do is an important part of what it means to be authentically Christian—no, what it means to be an authentic human being—Peter’s is a different kind of confession. He confesses what he believes.

And Peter’s confession of faith is an exciting one. Jesus is the one... the one we have been waiting for. I imagine it this way: Peter blurts out something that is as much a realization as it is a confession.

I am reminded of one of my favorite stories about Jane Brown. Anyone who was an active member of this church before 2009 knew who Jane Brown was. When she walked into the room, you knew it. You either saw her right away or you heard her right away. Everything about her was dramatic. She was tall, thin, always well dressed, had a commanding nose, and shockingly white hair pulled back into a perfect bun. Her voice could command a room and she spoke with the theatrical expression of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Shakespearean actress.

Well, during World War II, a dashing Navy officer, Blackwell Brown, proposed to her. Jane had a hard time deciding whether or not to accept his proposal, and so she put him off. Then, while sitting in a crowded theater listening to a symphony concert, she suddenly leapt to her feet and shouted out at the top of her voice, “I LOVE THAT MAN AND I’M GOING TO MARRY HIM!”

I don’t imagine Peter shouting, but I do imagine him suddenly being convicted of something he had been wondering if it was true. He probably had known Jesus since they were children, they had many conversations where he heard Jesus speak of his vision of a new kingdom of justice and reconciliation, and they spoke of taking this vision—which they called the “Gospel” or “Good



News”— to the people. When Jesus had called to him from the shore telling him that it was time to follow him, Peter left his fishing nets and did just that. Peter had watched  
first a few,  
then many,  
and then thousands

respond to Jesus when he preached and when he healed. The crowds grew so large that Peter once saw some guys tear a hole in the roof of a house just so they could lower their paralyzed friend to Jesus’ feet. All along, Peter has been wondering what all this means and what it is about Jesus that commands so much—  
commands attention,  
commands followers,  
even commands demons to flee.

Then, while on a journey, Jesus asks the disciples the questions, “Who do people say that I am?” That’s an easy one for the disciples because they all heard the theories and rumors.  
“John the Baptist, or someone like him,  
Elijah returned,  
or another prophet like Jeremiah or Isaiah.”

Then, Jesus asks them a second question: “Who do *you* say that I am?” That’s when Peter blurts out what we, the readers of Mark have known since the very first verse, but no one in the story has said out loud. Peter blurts it out: “You are the Christ.”  
A suspicion turned into a confession,  
An opinion becoming a proclamation.

Jesus is to be the leader of a revolution, the new king who will bring the past into the future and lead the people to reclaim their land and identity as a nation of God.

Jesus tells the disciples to keep this under their hat for now but does not yet rebuke Peter because there is nothing wrong with what he says. Peter may know only the good news, and not yet the hard news, but sometimes that’s enough.

Let’s claim that. We who believe in the God that we come to know in Christ have these moments when we claim something wonderful about life with God, and many of those celebration moments happen in church.

- We will have one of those moments on a Sunday in November when we will baptize Penelope Greenawalt. Of course, Penelope is going to have some hard and painful times in her life, but that won’t be on our minds that Sunday. You will strain to see the baby as she is walked up and down the aisle, and I’ll enjoy being the one to walk her. She might even cry or scream and the joy of it still won’t be robbed from us (although I doubt that will happen).



- We will have one of those moments on a Sunday in January, when eighth and ninth graders are confirmed. Those young people will already have had struggles to understand their place and responsibility in life, and they will face many challenges that will test their faith and integrity. But that won't be on our minds that Sunday. Some of us will have been in the church long enough to remember a few of their baptisms. We will have seen some of them pushed in strollers down church hallways, come to the bottom of the chancel stairs for children's sermons, or stand on the stairs singing in children's choirs. So, it will be just fine that they will be dressed up and have a happy picture taken that will be displayed on the wall outside the fellowship hall. It will be fine because our sole focus will be on a simple joyful truth: that they are coming into their own as followers of Christ.
- And we will have several of those moments on those Saturdays in November and May when four grown children of this church will answer the question, "Will you?" with "I Do!" and marry another. Never mind that they will learn that sometimes being married is hard, and it takes sustained commitment to keep their marriages strong as Jane and Blackwell Brown did for the better part of seven decades. But marriages are rightfully called celebrations because, you know what, if you get started in the right direction, the beginning should be celebrated even if the journey will sometimes be hard.

In these moments, we can better understand what Jesus meant when he said, "My yoke is easy and my burden is light."

We have these moments on our own. I don't usually share these memories because they can sound sappy and they reveal moments of my naivete, but I can remember moments when I was so overwhelmed with a sense of God's presence or purpose for my life that all I could feel was joy. No fear, no hesitation, just joy. I remember a specific moment when I was in seminary when I left an inspiring lecture on preaching just absolutely thrilled that one day, God willing, I would preach most Sundays.

Praise God for my naivete because it helped me be a better seminary student. It didn't matter that I didn't know then what I know now after 26 years of preaching as an ordained minister-

that crafting a good sermon is incredibly hard  
 and, because of the way I'm wired,  
     it sometimes robs my sleep,  
     sometimes wrecks my week,  
     and sometime makes people I care about become upset with me.

Preaching remains a privilege, but is also a burden because, as John Newton said, it is a tough chore when the point of preaching often is "to break the hard heart and heal the broken one." So, you know how difficult that is, often it is the preacher's heart that needs to be broken or healed the week before the sermon is preached.

But no one needed to tell me that when I was walking through the seminary quad all aglow with the excitement of one day standing in a pulpit week after week.



The problem with Peter and the disciples is that Jesus can't give them the luxury of remaining in the moment. The disciples see the growing crowds- exciting! But Jesus sees the growing anger of powerful people- frightening! The disciples see cause to celebrate. Jesus sees cause to prepare.

There is no time to wait. Jesus must let the disciples know what lies ahead. He is a leader, but his journey is to the cross. He is not going to be a revolutionary leader who is going to create a restored government- some *nation under God*. He is leading followers into a realm that is not about who holds the seats of power, or to whom taxes flow, or where borders are drawn and how they are defended.

He is witnessing to the love of God that wants justice for the powerless, compassion for the sick, acceptance of the outcast, and reconciliation between enemies.

Anyone who truly looks to Jesus for guidance to God, they will have to regain a fresh understanding of Gods Law, where all commands must be subject to love of God and neighbor and not protection of political power, racial identity, or social standing.

And since existing authorities, who benefit from how things stand, are increasingly resisting Jesus' vision, these disciples need to see what is coming. So, Jesus ruins the celebration by opening the curtain to the future. He tells them by what cost will come Jesus' witness... his life!

Peter can't hear that. Who can? Who wants to hear at an infant baptism what that child will later do that will worry and hurt their parents at confirmation what the struggles young adults will have figuring out what they are to do with their lives? or at weddings what hard chapters couples will go through sometimes to figure things out?

Never mind that Jesus goes on to say that even his death will not be the end of the story That God's love cannot be ended and the movement of compassion and justice cannot be stopped, that after three days, the grave will be empty

Peter doesn't want to hear what Jesus just said and he lets Jesus know it. And Jesus doesn't want to hear what Peter says... perhaps because Jesus doesn't like knowing of the cost either.



“Get behind me Tempter,” he says—  
at least that is what I think he really is saying when he says,  
“Get behind me, Satan.”

You know Peter needs to hear that good news at the end but that’s asking a lot of Peter and that’s asking a lot of us. But when we face the hard in life, we need to hear that the grave in the end is empty. Because it helps us realize that celebration isn’t just found in the good moments of life, but in all of it. There is a final celebration with God that takes in all the hard and the hurt. There is a final joy that absorbs within itself the costs that comes of failure *and* the costs that come of faith.

It is not the celebration of a baptism but of the best kind of memorial service. I led three memorial services this past week and spoke at another. When we remembered the lives of Marty Stuart, Marilyn, Bruce, and Rosanna, we remembered loved ones who died. But we enjoyed many happy memories and gave thanks. We gave thanks even knowing some of what they had to deal with in life...

their having lost loved ones,  
having faced challenges that they never thought they had to face,  
two of them eventually having to live with dementia,  
and two with cancer.

And yet, we honestly could celebrate four people who lived full lives. Even if we had known all that they would end up having to face, we’re still so glad they were born and lived.

You see, Jesus ruins the celebration of Peter’s confession of faith— because he is trying to lead them to a celebration of life that includes death. Peter eventually will get it— just not now.

Today is Stewardship Dedication Sunday. In the Presbyterian tradition and in our church, this is to be a day like a baptism, confirmation, or a wedding. We ask the choir to sing at both services, we bring in the brass, and we have what we call a “Joyful Procession of Stewards.” The commitment of our lives and resources to the work of the church is a way we concretely respond to God’s blessings with gratitude.

But maybe this Commitment Sunday, we can hear Jesus remind us that sometimes following him is hard. The challenges of the last 19 months have reminded us as a church what is true about us individually when we are trying to live as good people when the world tempts us to buy into power games and even hate... and when we are faced with a pandemic that has tried to keep us apart from each other.

We are not all the way through the pandemic, but with memories of the troubles of power struggles in our country and with the experience of the last two years of living during a pandemic, we now know that being faithful in our world involves cost, struggle, and sacrifice sometimes.

I think we have a lot of good reasons to celebrate life even when it includes the hard. This is true for us individually but let me speak for the church. Maybe, two Commitment Sundays ago, we



could be naïve in thinking that what laid ahead of us was simply continued worship and education, a lecture series and a church retreat, normal Bible Schools, meals at the church, and the support of the missions we always support.

But then the pandemic hit, and we had to put behind us some of what we thought had to happen. And you know what? You answered Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" anyway. You followed Jesus even when it was hard.

You remained resilient even in challenging times. Those of you who gave to the church this past year and a half helped the church remain faithful even when worship services and activities were canceled, when meetings were moved to Zoom, when visitation had to happen by phone. You helped us address issues like racism even though we could not get together to look in each other's eyes. We found ways to provide instruction and nurture for our children. You kept the Preschool staff paid when the Preschool had to shut down.

We were resilient. But we've also changed. We discovered that this traditional church could be adaptive and meet challenges. And best of all, we got to the point where even though we did what we had to do to stay safe, our focus has moved away from the immediate moment of pandemic to be looking toward the future.

For instance, we have made it even more clear to ourselves and Roanoke that we are committed to helping those less fortunate than ourselves. Everyone knew we were a congregation that took worship, preaching and education seriously—and that we care for those who are sick by visiting the homebound and comforting the grieving—but our quietly supporting local outreach was sometimes overlooked. But you gave almost a hundred thousand dollars over and beyond your pledged giving to help those with the greatest needs. Also, even under continuing constraints, we ran a *Mission Build* Campaign where we did something very few churches have ever done, we raised well over a million dollars so we could give it away- all of it for mission projects.

Thousands of families and individuals, and a good number of churches, will have better futures because of how you were the church this past two years.

So, today, let's celebrate all of life with God because we are with the one who is with us in times good and hard and who is always leading us to a greater realm where the justice and compassion of God's love has the final word. And in the coming year, let's show Roanoke and the world how we together answer the question, "Who do you say that I am?"

