

“Getting to Know Jesus”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
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**Mark 8: 27-38**

Think about the last time you met someone new. I’m not talking about someone you pass in the store and make cursory eye contact with and maybe say, “Good morning.” I’m talking about the last time you intentionally got to know someone you had not known previously. Perhaps it was a new colleague at work, or a new participant in a small group you belong to, or a fellow student at school, or a new neighbor who moves in on your street.

What happened first? You probably greeted each other, introduced yourself by giving your name, and perhaps some other small talk. Usually, that includes information about your family, your occupation or work, where you live, where you went to school, and so on. There’s this surface-level of information we tend to share with people we first meet. It’s enough to give a quick snapshot of who we are, but it’s not so much that we feel like we are instantly becoming best friends with someone who, up until a few minutes earlier, we had never met.

However, if the opportunity presents itself to meet again and build the relationship, we begin to share new information with that person. We might share about our families of origin, and the values our upbringing has instilled in us. We might share about our hopes for the future, and how we believe our sense of purpose is being fulfilled in our vocation. We might share about our concerns for the future, either for ourselves or for those we love. It is sharing information on that next level deeper than on the surface, and in that sharing of information we develop the foundations on which friendships are built: foundations of trust, integrity, mutual respect.

Of course, whether it is someone we have known our whole lives, or someone we have only known for a short time, there are limits to what we know about one another. No matter how long we have known someone, there can always be surprises in what we learn after many years. I had such an experience a couple of weeks ago. We were with my parents for dinner, celebrating their 49<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, and we got to talking about how they met. I knew that they met while Dad was a seminary intern at my Mom’s church in New York State. What shocked me was when my mother said, “And at the time your father was seeing someone else.” What?! In 43-plus years, I had never heard that before! Kind of makes me wonder what else I don’t know about my parents!

Now, think about what it was like for the disciples and Jesus. It’s generally believed that Jesus was around 30-years-old when he began his adult ministry, and that started with the calling of the disciples to follow him. And it was about three years later that he was crucified on the cross, and then

three days later he rose from the grave. So, we have, let's say, a three-year window in which the disciples are getting to know Jesus. In a way, they have progressed from this surface-level knowledge of him to the next level deeper. And yet, there is a great, great deal of mystery surrounding him, something that is evident throughout the gospels in how the disciples interact with their Lord.

Jesus and the disciples had probably been together for at least a year when we read this passage from Mark's Gospel. Earlier in the eighth chapter of Mark, Jesus has fed four thousand people with seven loaves of bread. Prior to this, Jesus feeds five thousand people with very little, heals the sick, casts out demons, and walks on the water to his disciples in a boat on the sea. In other words, they've been through a lot already! They are learning more and more about each other. But I'd imagine, if I was one of the disciples, I would be wondering, "Who is this man - really?"

Perhaps, when Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" he's testing the waters of their mutual relationship. He's gauging both what they are hearing from others they interact with, and also what the disciples themselves believe about him. They blurt out some of what they have heard the people say: "John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets." I have a feeling that, much like we do today, the disciples were not just sharing with Jesus what the crowds were saying, but also what they themselves believed. Is he the Messiah? Is he the one? They are still getting to know Jesus, and perhaps don't want to say something that is offensive or wrong.

But then, Jesus makes it personal, and does not allow the disciples to dodge what they believe. "But who do you say that I am?" We don't know if anyone else said anything. I can picture this quiet group of men, trying not to make eye contact with their leader, with awkward silence permeating everything. And then, either out of deep conviction or a willingness to take a risk, Peter blurts out: "You are the Messiah." Ding, ding, ding! Well done, sir. You get the prize! And what does our winner receive for his correct answer? "And Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him" (8:30).

What? Why not? What's going on here? Peter finally answers the question correctly - for the whole class, by the way - and the teacher tells all of them to keep it to themselves?

Well, maybe one hint about why Jesus doesn't want this shared is that, in fact, Peter's answer is not fully correct. Or, more accurately, Peter's response doesn't reflect what Jesus knows to be his role as the Messiah.

For Peter and the other disciples, when they heard "Messiah," they were "looking for a Messiah who will establish God's rule with power and authority, and who will bring his followers glory and reward" (Harry B. Adams, [Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4](#), Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 70). When Jesus starts talking about the suffering he must go through, the rejection he must endure, and his ultimate death (8:31), Peter can't take it anymore. "And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke Jesus" (8:32).

This isn't the Jesus Peter and the disciples were getting to know. This isn't what the Messiah is supposed to be. This doesn't mesh with the information they had shared over the last several months, or at least, it doesn't mesh with how the disciples interpreted their shared information. At one moment, Peter is the star pupil. At the next moment, he is the one rebuking his teacher.

And then, in the end, he is the one who is ultimately chastised and put in his own place by the teacher himself. "But turning and looking at his disciples, Jesus rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things!'" (8:33). It is another example that just when folks thought they knew who Jesus was, they really did not.

Yes, he is the Messiah, but he is not their kind of Messiah. He is a Messiah who will lead through humility, not power. He is a Messiah who will bring reconciliation and redemption through self-sacrifice. And if you are to proclaim that he is your Messiah, and if you wish to be his follower, then "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 lost their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it" (8:34-35).

We have many names for Jesus: friend, helper, teacher, Lord, Savior, Son of God. We get to know him in many different ways: through the gospel accounts and the Bible; the experiences others' share about their faith journey; our personal experiences in prayer. In many ways, our entire lives are a journey of getting to know Jesus in ever-deepening ways. As children, we may know him as the gentle soul who welcomes the little ones, no matter the setting. As a teenager, we may know him as the patient listener when it seems no one else understands what we are going through. As a new parent, we may know him as our source of strength when we are tired and stretched way-too-thin. As a middle-aged adult, we may know him as our guide when it seems that we are stuck and unsure as to where to go next in life. As a retiree, we may know him as the one who comforts us when we grieve, who reassures us when we worry, and who is ready to welcome us when our life here is nearing its end.

I believe that as we mature in faith, we get to know Jesus in a deeper, more complete way. When we are new to the faith, it is hard for us to hear him say - much like it was for the disciples - that he must suffer, that he must die, and that following him requires losing our own life for the sake of the gospel. But as we mature, as we grasp the depth and breadth of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, we get to know more fully what exactly God chose to do in sending his only Son into this world. Our proper response to God's selfless act of love is to live each day of our lives here in a similar manner. That's what denying ourselves means: seeing first the needs of our neighbor, and loving them the way God has first loved us in Jesus Christ. We are all on that journey of getting to Jesus, and we are all on different stops along the journey. The beauty of the church is that we learn from one another

where each of us are on that journey, and in so doing, we draw closer to truly getting to know the one who created us, who redeems us, and who forever sustains us by his love.

I want to close by speaking to those of you who are guests with us today. We are thrilled you are here. We are glad you came at someone's invitation or simply came on your own today. It means so much to us that you would come, and I hope you will stay for lunch after worship, so we might have a chance to share in conversation with one another, getting to know each other in a deeper way.

Let me tell you a couple of quick things about who we are as a church. We are not perfect, and we don't try to be. We come from a variety of experiences and backgrounds, and we have lots of diverse opinions about various topics and issues. We love to eat - like most churches do! And we are all on different places of that journey I mentioned, the journey of getting to know Jesus.

But one thing that makes our church unique is that we will love you as we love one another in Christ's name. Despite our differences, we are an open, caring, community, and that was evident for me just this past week. I witnessed it when the participants in our GriefShare support group welcomed a person from the community with love and warmth, and she was made to feel safe and supported right away. I heard it from the leadership of IPS School 96, who thanked our church for "loving on our children" through the Discovery Time and Mentoring Program we hold on Wednesdays. I witnessed it when members of our church invited three friends to join our Prime Timers group this past Tuesday for lunch and a program.

If that is appealing to you and you'd like to continue your journey of faith alongside us, then know we'd love for you to join us as we get to know Jesus together. If you're not sure yet or you're just passing through, then know we are thrilled that you are here today, and that you are always welcome in this place.

And if any of us are ever wondering who it is we are seeking to know more fully and deeply on this journey of faith, may God's Spirit guide us along our path as we get to know our Savior, our Lord, our Messiah.

Thanks be to God. Amen.