

Fishing or Faithing?

James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

We tend to say to say what we think, which implies that if we can't say it, we may not have thought much about it.

"Thanks be to God." We don't just think it, we actually say it. A somewhat programmed response perhaps, maybe without thinking about that little versicle. The demeanor mimics other things that we say, like "God bless you," which is an automatic reaction to another person's sneeze. Sometimes, without even really thinking about we will say: "Love ya!"

Of course there are probably things that we would like to say, but think the better of it. For as the passage from the Letter of James notes: the tongue can have a power all of its own. So, best practices tell us to make our words mean something, whether by speaking them, or by withholding them.

Jesus wants an audible response: Who do you say that I am?
Why did He ask it? Is Jesus testing the waters, or testing the disciples' faith?

We wouldn't blame Him if He was simply testing the waters.
That is, was He making headway in His mission for people believe in Him?

Leaders often do this, either formally or informally. Public figures, and politicians in particular, pay attention to sample sizes and polls. People looking to be elected, or re-elected for that matter, care about the ratings. They pay money to get reputable polling organizations to give them realistic numbers, hoping, of course, that the news will be good.

The same can be said for businesses that take market samples to ensure that their product will sell and make a profit. So they pay attention to trends and the prospective consumer's wants. If you have a message, even have an idea or product, doing the market research doesn't hurt.

Congregations and religious denominations can get caught up in this kind of information gathering. Some even use "best practices" from the secular marketing culture in the hopes that their "message" will interest more "consumers." Hence, polls and surveys. Here's one, from the Pew Research Center. ([Christian Century](#), August 29, 2018, p.9)

Reasons U.S. adults give for why they attend religious services at least once or twice a month:

- 81% To become closer to God
- 69% So children will have a moral foundation
- 68% To make me a better person
- 66% For comfort in times of trouble or sorrow
- 59% I find the sermons valuable
- 57% To be a part of a community of faith
- 37% To continue family's faith tradition
- 31% I feel a religious obligation to go
- 19% To meet new people or socialize
- 16% To please my family, spouse or partner

In this particular poll that has been cited, the numbers reveal that "becoming closer to God" is almost what every respondent to the poll deems crucial. This poll might focus understandings

about what are people around us and amongst us are thinking? Not that we will let polls determine the direction of ministry, but it can be interesting to know.

And so the first question by Christ is about what people were saying about Jesus. Informational. An unscientific survey perhaps.

But what about His own disciples?

That would be the real question. That was what Jesus really wanted know.

To be leaders and apostles they had to vocalize their own faith in Him, in whatever metaphors and convictions made sense to them individually. Did they own their faith in a way that was not something borrowed *or maybe even safe*? **For the strength of the church would not be mimicking public opinion, but the unapologetic confession of its own people. And even more so: the real test of faith is not what the disciples of Christ thought of Christ, but what they would actually say about Him.**

For ruling elders in any congregation and this one as well, following the legacy of those first twelve disciples, proclaiming one's faith in Jesus Christ, is pivotal. It is the first ordination question for them. In somewhat the same way, when people become members of the church, it is not a shuffling of papers, but standing in front of the congregation, and vocally declaring: "Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior."

For the central question of a Christian will properly not be what one thinks of the church, and not about the time for worship, and not what we think of the music, or not what what we think of the preacher (thankfully). But rather the most important words will be about what we say Jesus means to us. A generation after the scene in our Gospel text, Peter will say to the Church:

Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence. (1 Peter 3.15-16)

It is odd perhaps that Peter should make this statement, seeing as how Peter was the one following Christ at a distance during the night of our Lord's arrest. Peter...the one who proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah in Caesarea Phillipi in the loudest of voices, now grew silent and even dismissive of Christ ... and Jesus noticed. (Luke 22.61). I assume that the Lord always notices what we say.

And that will be the question. When, in these changing times in which the past is not coming back... in a culture where the new generations are not satisfied with the same old answers, formulas and assumptions ... will we follow at a distance, or will we still claim Jesus as our Lord, even if that voice that we employ is small and shaky, but unapologetic. For the question by the Master, once again, is specifically and carefully worded: **The question is not...who do you think I am, but who do you say that I am?**

Hopefully you will always show evidence of loving to tell the story, not only in here, but out there. When the time comes, and it will, who will you say Jesus is?

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.