

“BACK TO BASICS!”
Mark 8:27-38
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Once when the Green Bay Packers were being coached by the legendary Vince Lombardi, the team suffered a humiliating defeat to a team reporters called “an inferior squad.” According to Lombardi, the loss was simply “inexcusable.” Gathering the players together the next morning in the locker room, Lombardi announced that he was going back to the basics. Holding a football high enough in the air for all to see, he thundered, “*Gentlemen, this is a football!*”

His lesson apparently worked, for Vince Lombardi went on to lead the Green Bay Packers to a Superbowl championship.

Today we begin a new season in the life of this congregation. We have not suffered defeat. Yet at the same time we have not always made the decisions and lived the lives that God would have us to live, both as individuals and as a community of faith. We have not always made the impact upon the community and the world that Christian people are called to make. This morning, I want to get back to basics! I want to lift high the cross of Christ and focus on Jesus, the central figure of our faith.

I believe that the question Jesus asked the disciples that day as they were walking from one village to the next is the basic question of the Christian faith. In fact, I believe the question, “*Who is Jesus?*” is the most important question you will ever be asked; and your answer is the most significant statement you will ever speak. The answer to that question not only indicates what we believe, but shapes the way we live our lives.

As in Jesus’ day, the culture is full of questions about who Jesus is. The disciples responded by saying that some folks thought he was John the Baptist, a fiery preacher. What they were saying is that they’d heard good sermons before, and now there were good sermons again. Some mistook Jesus for Elijah — a prophet who had done miracles in ancient Israel. Since Jesus was reported to be doing miracles too, this must be a reincarnation of Elijah, a holy man of God. Both John the Baptist and Elijah were great men, but they were only men with the same weaknesses and shortcomings that all men possess. Many people today believe that Jesus was a teacher, a wonderful teacher, a teacher of profound truth, but a mere man like other men. Jews and Muslims believe that there was a Jesus, and that he said some powerful things.

Then Jesus turns the question to the disciples and asks the question that must ultimately be answered by every human being: “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter, responding for the group, says, “You are the Messiah.” You are the Christ, the chosen one of God.

It is clear from Jesus’ response and the continuing dialogue that Peter has given the right answer. But before the disciples go public with this announcement, Jesus wants to explain what

being the Messiah means for him and for the world. You see, the Jewish people had been looking for a Messiah for centuries. Ever since David's kingdom had been overthrown by the invading armies of other countries, and left the Israelites divided and conquered, the people had been looking for a savior who would come and unite their country and bring peace to their land. The prophets envisioned a day when the Messiah would reign in Jerusalem and bring peace to the whole world. As a people currently under the domination of Rome, the thought of a Messiah was especially appealing. The disciples sincerely believed that Jesus was the one. Do you believe that Jesus is the one? Is he the one who can bring peace not only to our lives, but to our troubled world as well?

In that one clear moment, Peter was able to give the right answer, to proclaim the basic truth that Jesus is the one who is the answer to all the problems we have in life. When we are at our best, we believe that, too, don't we? At least some of us do. Some of us have been to camp where we heard the still, small voice of Jesus speaking to our hearts, and in that moment we knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that God is real and that God has a plan for our lives. For some of us at an Emmaus Walk or a Chrysalis week-end, God seemed so very near. Sometimes someone will come up to me after worship and say, "God really spoke to me today. That sermon was just what I needed to hear." When we are in the midst of problems, uncertainties and all the challenges that life sends our way, can we think back and remember those moments when God's message was clear, those times when we were able to say with Peter, "You are the one. You are the Messiah"?

As a District Superintendent, one of my responsibilities was to counsel with pastors, some of whom were questioning their effectiveness and the strength of their convictions. At District Superintendent's training, we were encouraged to have these pastors remember their call, to think back to when they felt the nudging of the Holy Spirit calling them into ministry, to get back to basics, you see. Can you remember times when God's message seemed crystal clear? Recalling those moments can help us on days when life is more confusing than we ever imagined it could be.

Peter shares without hesitation that Jesus is the Messiah. But before he announces that to the world, Jesus wants to explain what being the Messiah is all about. The Bible says Jesus spoke "quite openly" with the disciples, telling them that he was not the conquering hero that many were expecting. For Jesus, being the Messiah did not mean amassing worldly power and societal privilege. Instead, Jesus told them that he would undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the religious establishment of his day and be killed, and after three days rise again.

Well, that's not what the disciples wanted to hear! In fact, Peter takes Jesus aside and tells him so. But Jesus will not change his message, nor his mission. He tells Peter that Peter is focusing on human values rather than on the things of the spirit. The Messiah will not be a conquering hero, Jesus insists. Rather, he will be a suffering servant.

Then Jesus says, "There's more!" If you want to follow me, you will not be handed life on a silver platter. You, too, will be expected to take up your cross, in other words, to perform some deliberate actions because of your faith. I always say when I am teaching a new members class that Christian service means there ought to be something, at least one thing, that we are doing in our life because we are a Christian that we would not be doing if we weren't a Christian. You see, taking up your cross does not mean putting up with a noisy neighbor or an annoying mother-in-law or the kid that is rude to you on the school bus. Taking up your cross

means deliberately doing something that costs you some time and money and energy in order to make this world a better place.

This morning I ask you, what are you doing because you are a Christian? Let's get back to basics. What are you doing as a result of your faith? Are you following in the footprints of the Messiah?

Peter's dialogue with Jesus came when they were going through the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi is in northern Galilee on the border between the Jewish and Gentile territories. From its hills, the disciples could look across the Sea of Galilee and recall the ministry of Jesus through the past few years and then look ahead to see the costly path that would lead him to Jerusalem. Today, we are on the border between the past with all its memories, both good and bad, and the future which is filled with both danger and opportunity. A new season is beginning. As Renee observed, we will need to rely on God's strength and guidance if we are to make an impact and fulfill God's dreams for our lives during this coming year. What is Jesus saying "quite openly" to us this morning? I think he is saying, "Go for it! Let yourself go. Get involved in the things of the spirit. Take up your cross and follow me!"

In a recent book, author and social commentator, Neil Postman, notes that we modern people have convinced ourselves that we need more facts. "We are waiting for the data to come in," our government tells us about important social decisions. Postman says that we are deluding ourselves with our technology. He says we don't need more facts. We don't need more information. What we are dying of is a lack of courage, a lack of vision, a lack of dreams, a lack of insight.(2) We need to get back to basics!

Who is Jesus? I believe that how you answer that question will affect the rest of your life on this earth and your life in the hereafter. How you answer that question will affect how you live your life each day: the decisions you make and the priorities you establish. Let's get **back to basics!** Let's reflect again on how his life can change ours. Let's think together about that One Solitary Life.

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant. He grew up in another village, where he worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty. Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher.

He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a home. He didn't go to college. He never lived in a big city. He never traveled 200 miles from the place where he was born. He did none of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself.

He was only 33 when the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for his garment, the only property he had on earth. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave, through the pity of a friend.

Twenty centuries have come and gone, and today he is a central figure of the human race. I am well within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kinds that ever reigned — put together — have not affected life on this earth as much as that one, solitary life.(3)

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for Jesus. Help us to continue to discover who he is, and help us to follow where he leads. In his name we pray. Amen.

Notes:

1. Swindoll, Charles. *Growing Strong Seasons of Life*.
2. Postman, Neil. *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*.
3. Attributed to James Allen Francis.