

How Shall We Acknowledge Christ?

The Second Sunday in Lent – February 28, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Mark 8:31-38

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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. 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."

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. 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? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 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."

Our Gospel lesson concludes with a simple, pithy and powerful warning from our Lord. *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.* This same teaching is repeated in the Gospel of Matthew (10:32-33), and in this passage something is added: *Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven.* Matthew expands on Mark, but the meaning is all implied in Mark. Jesus addresses us with some very serious business. On the last day, that is, the Day of Judgment, will Jesus stand by us as our Savior and friend, or will we be rejected? What we do today will determine how that final day will happen. This saying of Jesus is brief enough that it is easy to skip over it in our reading and study of the scripture, but we would do well to pause and ponder. We need to give some serious thought to what it means to be ashamed of Jesus, or to acknowledge Him.

There is a glorious simplicity and reciprocity to this saying. If we are ashamed of Christ, Christ shall be ashamed of us. If we acknowledge Christ, Christ shall acknowledge us. It is simple and logical. If we give Jesus the cold shoulder Jesus will do the same to us, and if we warmly embrace and celebrate Jesus, Jesus will be glad to claim us as dear friends.

This is also a very personal kind of teaching as it addresses our one-to-one relationship with Jesus. This teaching makes a lot of sense and I enjoy challenging our confirmation kids with these words of our Lord. They understand the social world of friendships and groups, and they have felt the pains of rejection when snubbed by one they thought was a friend. Some may even admit that they have done the same to others. This is all a serious matter and we must be very careful that we never do this to our Lord.

Jesus is talking about our relationship with Him. How does Jesus rate among our friends? We may be quick to say that Jesus is first in our lives, but is this really the way that we live our lives? There may have been times in our lives when Jesus was very much at the front of our thoughts and intentions, but has He faded from the scene since then? Might our relationship be dying from neglect? These are the important questions which Jesus is raising.

Jesus' teaching has extremely serious implications, and it deals with a matter which we have trouble addressing—the future. We are very much a people trapped in the present, with too little thought for road ahead. Indeed, Jesus taught us to live one day at a time, but this is not to be used as an excuse to ignore our destination. We can be quick to act in a way which thinks only of the present circumstance when we should be thinking in a bigger way. It may be very convenient at the moment to ignore Christ or our faith. "I will give to the Church later, but first I really want to buy this new gizmo." "I would love to stop and help this person, but I have so many other things to do." But Jesus wants us to beware of what we do today, for it has implications for eternity. We can become very accustomed to brushing Jesus aside, but let us beware, for there may come a day when Jesus will brush *us* aside! Jesus is giving us a very important heads-up.

Let us consider a little further what it may mean to deny or to be ashamed of Jesus. I suppose that for the early Church, and for the persecuted Church there is a very plain and simple meaning to this teaching of Jesus. It was common for believers in the first century to be taken before judges and government authorities and asked if they were followers of Jesus, and an affirmative answer could lead to punishment or even death. Jesus was exhorting the believers to be courageous on that day, just as our Lord was courageous when he took the path to the Cross. Jesus' main intention could have been to strengthen believers who would eventually face that painful trial, but it is also noteworthy that Jesus uses the word *ashamed* and not *deny*. Deny would seem to imply an answer before a judge while ashamed might have more to do with simply being slow to admit to being a Christian. Along these lines, it is most interesting that the Gospel of Mark is believed to have been primarily made up of the testimony of Peter the Apostle who denied Jesus when asked if he was associated with him. Peter had stood on both sides of this teaching. Once he denied Jesus, but he would spend the rest of his life acknowledging Jesus boldly, and dying a martyr's death. Certainly, Peter could give quite a sermon on this passage!

We are not living in a time and place when Christians are dragged before courts to answer for their faith, but we still live in a time and place when our love for Jesus can be affirmed or denied. How do we deny our allegiance to Jesus? We can do so with our words. Does our daily speech acknowledge or deny our faith in Jesus, or is God simply not to be found in our conversation? Over my lifetime I have had people tell me that I appear to be very proud of my family because of the way that I talk about them. This is a very heartening comment to hear, and it makes me then ask myself, “and do they sense my affection for my Lord?”

We can deny Jesus by our silence. This can be a lack of things we say as a testimony of our faith. No one wants to be seen as the preacher or the insufferable religious nut who is always harping on people about their faith, but our general silence in raising matters of faith is a far cry from wandering into such territory! Simply to mention a faith involvement, a church event, an insight from your daily devotions or an answered prayer can be a powerful statement of faith. We can become too silent about our faith, and we can be dangerously silent when the Church or our faith is criticized. We may hear mocking of the Christian faith, or criticism of a particular congregation or faith tradition. “My fundamentalist neighbor keeps asking me where I am going to spend eternity. He can be so obnoxious with his questions. That’s none of his business!” It is too easy to laugh along with this mockery, or even to affirm that this neighbor is impolite or strange. And how does this serve the cause of Christ? Perhaps this overzealous person is a little strange and less than polite, but for the sake of our Lord and our friend, we might address the matter with a little more care. “I suppose he may be a little to forceful, but it is a pretty important matter of where we spend eternity.” We can be so careful to distance ourselves from other Christians with whom we do not fully agree that we may find ourselves distancing ourselves from Christ!

We also testify to Jesus by our deeds. To be honest, many folks who are very reticent about speaking of our faith are quick to affirm the importance of demonstrating faith by deeds, but in actuality are not doing all that many deeds for our Lord. At a most basic level, we can lead honest lives which earn their wages and don’t cheat others. But real Christian testimony is given in freely helping all kinds of people, and this is easier said than done. How many times do we tell ourselves, “I would love to stop and help her, but I am so busy.”

Jesus calls us to not be ashamed of Him but to acknowledge Him before others, and this is not an easy matter. It is significant that this teaching comes at the end of an extensive teaching on the stresses and pains of being a Christian. Jesus begins with the declaration of his betrayal and crucifixion. Peter wants to be sure that this never happens, and like Peter we are quick to erase all suffering from our agendas! But Jesus rebukes Peter and goes on to make clear the sacrifice and losses which are a natural part of being a believer. It has been said that we Americans like to fix things and design a better system. When we see pain or difficulty, we want to be sure that it eventually be eliminated, but Jesus assures us that as Christians we will know pains and

difficulties. Yes, God will sustain us along the way and bring blessings and joys, but there will be pain. Think for a moment of the matter of giving to the Church and to charities. We love to quote verses like Luke 6:38: *Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.* Giving is always a challenge, but Jesus assures us that in the end, and perhaps much sooner, we will receive a multiplication of blessings for all that we give. If you have ever been serious about giving you have undoubtedly experienced such blessings, but this must not erase another aspect of giving. It is always a challenge, and occasionally we miss that which we have given away. That is the nature of sacrifice. That is the nature of walking with Jesus, who served, sacrificed and suffered. The walk of faith is hard. Let us not be surprised when we experience pains along the way. In fact, if your life is lacking in such pains, you may not be living the full life of discipleship to which you have been called! Jesus wants us to be brave Christians.

Jesus wants us not to be *ashamed*, but to *acknowledge*, and how shall we do this? Again, we might be wise to begin by remembering the setting of the first century and early Church. A Christian would have stood out in the ancient world. They no longer participated in the pagan world of countless idols and of pagan worship. Now they kept company with other believers and much time, especially on Sunday, was spent with this family of faith. To do this proudly and gladly was a big step toward acknowledging Jesus Christ. Today is a very different day. We live in what is considered in ways to be a Christian nation, so we do not stand out as the believers of old once did. We are not being hauled before courts to confess our faith on threat of death. Our call to acknowledge Jesus must be done in the living of a faith which shines and speaks of genuine loyalty. The conversation gets very interesting when we start to consider how we are to express our loyalty to Christ.

One could even ask if we could over-express our acknowledgement of Christ. Remember the football player Tim Tebow? About a dozen years ago he created a stir in college football with his expressions of Christian faith. During nationally televised games Tim would kneel in a prayer of thanks after scoring a touchdown. This became very much a topic of conversation when he entered the NFL and continued this practice. Some rejoiced in this bold expression of faith and saw it as a courageous act. As could be expected the news media followed him very closely for a few years with great hopes of finding a newsworthy lapse in his behavior which would make him into a hypocrite and not a true Christian. They never found anything. Some argued that such professions of faith were not appropriate for a football game when people didn't want to be preached at. I was not completely comfortable with Mr. Tebow's displays of faith, but I was glad to see a young man so full of faith and zeal for Christ. He certainly was not ashamed of Jesus Christ!

We now find ourselves in the age of advertising, and this promotional effort seems to have found its way onto every baseball cap, tee-shirt and sweatshirt. Bumper stickers

abound, and all these items are aimed at letting the world know a person's loyalties. There is also a large market for bling of all kinds which presents crosses and other Christian symbols. At first this all seems good and reasonable for the Christian, but it does raise questions. Jesus was very critical of the Pharisees when they "practiced their piety before men," (Matthew 6:1-2) to be seen and praised by people for their religiousness, while actually displeasing God. Jesus was pleading for a piety which was real, and more concerned about helping others and honoring God, and not desiring to call attention to oneself. So when are over-advertising our allegiance to Christ in a way which becomes false and self-serving, and when are we being so discrete in our expression of faith that we are "hiding our light under a bushel"? (Matthew 5:14-16) These are good questions and challenging ones as well. Time does not permit a full study of the matter at the moment, but these questions raise concerns which should always be on our minds. Let us seek to be authentic testimonies to Jesus.

So how shall we acknowledge Jesus before people? There is no simple formula of proper behaviors which will settle the matter. Acknowledging Christ in and through our lives must become a passion and goal which is always before us, and to get a better grasp on that goal, consider this question which a wise person posed many years ago. If being a Christian became illegal, what kind of trouble would you be in? Would your life arouse no suspicion of any such association, or would you be high on the district attorney's list of likely suspects? Would there be evidence against you, like money transfers to the Lord's work, associations with hurting people that you have assisted, time spent in praise and fellowship with believers? Or would you be able to stroll by the police station without a worry?

I close with a familiar hymn which lends us great insight into Jesus' teaching: "The Old Rugged Cross." As a young man this hymn meant little to me. I suppose I found the tune to be just a bit maudlin and sentimental, and so I paid little attention to the words. Early in my ministry I was leading worship in a nursing home and the group I was leading was made up of especially frail folks. They love this hymn and sang it with an amazing passion, and it was then that I understood the beauty of the song:

*On a hill far away, stood an old rugged Cross,
the emblem of suffering and shame.
and I love that old Cross, where the dearest and best,
for a world of lost sinners was slain.
So I'll cherish the old rugged Cross,
till my trophies at last I lay down.
I will cling to the old rugged Cross,
and exchange it someday for a crown.*

You see, it is all about trophies and the Cross. The trophies are the awards and honors which the world gives and which we so love. These may be matters of good reputation, professional success, financial blessing, or even actual trophies, and they can all

be good things. Then there is the Cross of Christ. This is not my achievement, but the unimaginable gift of God, and ultimately, it is my only hope as the trophies are all going to eventually evaporate. These old folks loved this hymn, especially as the trophies and achievements of this world were now meaningless to them. But they had the Cross of Jesus Christ and the promise of eternal light. They would gladly sing and testify to this marvelous Savior, and they have taught me to join them in their song.

We don't need to be in the nursing home to understand the truth about trophies and the Cross. Jesus wants us to see the trophies for what they are, and to stay close and loyal to Him, as this is the path to life.