

# Decide! Confess! Rally!

Sunday, September 12, 2021 – Rally Day  
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania  
Pastor James Haun

## Mark 8:27-38

*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?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*

*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."*

On this Rally Day we gather our Sunday school after a summer of vacation and recommit ourselves to learning, to worship, and to Christ's service in the program year ahead. Our Gospel lesson is particularly appropriate for this day as we find Jesus' best Rally Day student, Peter, demonstrating the real meaning of it all. He shows us how to decide, to confess, and to rally to the cause of Jesus the Messiah. Many are slow to see the exemplary faith of Peter. The Bible reports his many missteps and foibles, and while these cannot be ignored, we must not overlook his virtues and successes which were many! A few weeks ago, we considered his awkwardly worded affirmation of Jesus in John 6 (v. 68). While his remarks sounded less than eloquent, they were actually an expression of a deep and full understanding of true faith in a confusing world. In today's passage we

are easily distracted by Jesus' harsh exchange with Peter, but we must not let this blind us to the courage and wisdom of Peter's confession of Christ. We do well to study Peter carefully, for he reminds us of the true meaning of Rally Day.

In our Gospel lesson we find Jesus pushing his disciples toward decision. Their Rally Day had come, and while the twelve had shown tremendous faith by leaving all to follow, Jesus saw the need for them to take that commitment to the next level. He began with an amusing and harmless sounding question, and the disciples all chimed in with their own perceptions and opinions. *He asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."* Jesus was much talked about in those days and the disciples had heard many opinions which they freely shared. Both now and back then, we all love public opinion polls, and it feels safe to speak of other people's beliefs. Jesus then wasted little time in posing the truly important question. *He asked them, "But who do **you** say that I am?"* Now the disciples are silent! It is easy and even fun to speak of other people's thoughts, but it is much harder to speak one's own convictions. The disciples had plenty of thoughts on the matter, but they hesitated to speak, for to speak meant not only to express a belief, but also to become obligated to act upon that belief. We are often slow to speak our deepest beliefs for fear that we will then be required to act upon that stated faith.

The disciples had become silent, except for one. Peter courageously spoke his deepest belief. *Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."* Messiah is a Hebrew word which means the same as the Greek term Christ. Peter declared that Jesus was the great and absolute leader for which Israel had been waiting. To call someone the Messiah was to say that this person demanded our full allegiance, and Peter was ready to make that commitment. The timidity of the others is very understandable. It would appear that all held Jesus in the very highest esteem but were not ready to fully commit. One is reminded of the young man who believes that he has found the love of his life. Now what? This star-struck youth may find it painful to keep his love a secret, but he may be restrained by the necessity of having to do something about it if he confesses his love. "What if I tell her I love her? Will that mean we must be married? Am I ready for that?" We live in an increasingly cautious age where commitments are slow in coming. Today we find young people being ever so slow to become engaged, and that those engagements may last for years. It has been amusing to tell young people that I am counseling for marriage how Kay and I were married just a year after we first started dating. Many couples are horrified by this admission of such a hasty decision! We live in an increasingly commitment-averse age.

Peter was a man of courage who realized that Jesus was the Promised One and was not slow to respond accordingly. Having received Peter's confession Jesus quickly moved on to the next lesson—what awaits those who will follow Him. This lesson is a tough one and Jesus is blunt. The road of commitment to God's will shall be a rough one for Jesus. *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.* Here begins the painful exchange between Jesus and Peter, and before we judge Peter, we must carefully consider all that is happening. Jesus spoke of the Messiah's mission which was not to come as a grand conqueror, as the people had hoped. The Savior was instead to suffer and die for the sins of the world, and then rise in glory. There was no way that the disciples could fully understand and accept these words of Jesus. Peter was horrified and responded as many of us would have responded. He was certain that now was the time to step up even further, to defend his Master and to rescue. *And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.* Jesus' response was harsh and immediate. *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."* To prevent Jesus from suffering and dying would be preventing God's will from being done, and Peter was strongly rebuked for his worldly thinking. This was a hard lesson which Peter and the rest of the apostles would only come to understand much later. Peter's thinking was greatly misguided, but he was no villain or fool.

Jesus continued to teach of the troubles which face all those who follow Him. Not only will great trouble and suffering come to the Messiah, but the Messiah's followers will also face serious problems. *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.* To follow Jesus is first, to deny oneself. We are to hand our will over to God. Each Sunday we pray, *Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done.* Such is the radical nature of our faith. In modern times some have avoided the use of the word Lord as they find it offensive. There is something comical in these conversations as the word Lord is by its very nature offensive, for to call someone Lord is to admit that they are the one in charge and not ourselves, and that is a bitter pill for we humans to swallow. Jesus speaks of taking up the cross. This is not to say that all of Jesus' followers will be crucified, but it does mean that just as he was obedient to death on a cross, so we also must be obedient and follow God's direction wherever that may lead. People commonly look to religion as a source of comfort and the promise of inner peace. Our faith does indeed offer such blessings, but the path to those blessings may not be a comfortable or peaceful one!

Having offered painful words of caution to his followers, he immediately proceeds to give a harsher word of warning to those who would deny him! *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?* His logic is straightforward and irrefutable. It makes good sense to give up one's mortal life and privileges if it means gaining eternal life. Jim Eliot, the American missionary who was martyred by the South American tribe he sought to evangelize had a motto which summarizes it all well. *That man is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain that which he cannot lose.* Yes, explains Jesus, the path of obedience is challenging, but what could be worse than the path which leads to eternal death? His final remark makes yet another push toward making our decision for Christ. *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.*" If we remain silent before the world regarding our allegiance to Christ, He may in return refrain to speak up on our behalf! Deniers of Christ, beware.

These are very intense verses, so let us step back for just a moment to consider them in another light. As stated earlier, we live in an increasingly commitment-averse society, but we are still familiar with the need for such promises. I ask all to consider for just a moment the genuine commitments which they have made in their lives. Aren't these the actions which have given real meaning and satisfaction to your life? Vacations and fun events may give us immediate refreshment, but what are the things which cause us to look back over our lives with a deep sense of gratitude and satisfaction? One thinks of the vows of marriage, the enormous task of raising children, the long-term effort of a career, the seemingly endless payments on a home mortgage, and the acts of service which we have performed for others. Many look to their years of military service with great fondness as they see it as a vow fulfilled. It is my prayer that our greatest joy is found in our commitment to walk with our loving Savior, regardless of the cost. Commitment is where life begins, yet our natural impulse is to avoid commitment and to "keep our options open." Indeed, one must not be hasty in making great commitments and it is often wise to keep one's options open, but this is not a long-term strategy for a meaningful life. I can hardly imagine someone on their death bed voicing their thanks they got through life avoiding any big commitments.

Rally Day is a call to renew our decisions and commitments, and while we may think of this as a message to young people it is truly a word for *all* ages. Yes, it is a truly beautiful thing when a young person begins their life with such a mindset as there are likely many years ahead for them, but this is also a message for the older set. Jesus makes no distinction regarding age. As we grow older, we must avoid the twin errors of "resting on our laurels" and taking early retirement from Christian service, or of looking back with regret over apparently wasted years as though it is too late to change the situation. *Now is the day to hear Jesus' call, take up our crosses and to follow in glad service as Jesus directs.*

Rally Day, properly understood, is a decision time. It is a time to be reminded that we are soldiers for Jesus Christ. The year will unfold before us, and the pressures of our schedule and other commitments may tempt us to become lax in our campaign, but true soldiers continue on as they are sworn to loyalty. Peter got it right. *He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah," and he made good on that confession. Peter knew how to rally! Let us learn from the master.*

A blessed Rally Day to you all.