

Vermont Fusion

The Reverend Peter Cook

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The First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ
Burlington, Vermont

Mark 8:27-38

²⁷Jesus 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?" ²⁸And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." ²⁹He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." ³⁰And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹Then 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. ³²He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³But 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."

³⁴He 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. ³⁵For 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. ³⁶For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸Those 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."

When I was 16, I moved from Berkeley, California to Columbia, Maryland. I went from an urban west coast setting to a suburban community outside of Baltimore. Like most people going into a new high school, I was anxious to make a novel impression. I wanted to show my peers that I was California cool. So what do you suppose I wore when I arrived at my first day at Wilde Lake High School? Well I wore a quiana shirt (that would be a faux silk nylon shirt with a bold pattern) and some peach bell bottoms which had a sort of braided belt sewn on. I also wore puka shells around my neck and had a pair of shoes called roots or earth shoes, which had a heel that was

lower at the back than at the front. I strode into my new high school thinking I was my own person.

Unfortunately, my incredible coolness quickly lost its luster as I realized I looked completely stupid when compared to all the other guys who wore straight leg jeans and button down shirts. By the time I arrived in the lunchroom, all I wanted to do was hide. By three o'clock in the afternoon, I was begging for a new persona and asked my mother if she could please take me to the shopping mall that afternoon to buy the suburban uniform which consisted of several pairs of straight legged Levis (not bell bottoms for heaven's sake) and several button down oxford cloth shirts in assorted colors. I also bought a nice pair of tennis shoes. My old persona from Berkeley was quickly tucked away in the back of my bedroom closet. I was instantly transformed from the kid from Berkeley, California into an East Coast suburbanite.

Now it is my earnest prayer for those of you who just started school that you had better judgment and did not experience such trauma. But I do understand that when we start somewhere new we all want to make a good first impression. "Who do you say you are?" People might ask. We have to figure out what to say and how we look. That's difficult sometimes. As I begin ministry, I am fond of asking people to tell me a little about themselves. Did you grow up here? How long have you been in Vermont? What occupies your time? Who do you say that you are? The answers are marvelously varied and unpredictable. Every story has a surprise. I am an artist born and raised on Vermont farm. Or, I am doctor from Florida who likes to sail. I am a student who used to live in a refugee camp before I came here. I am a teacher from Chicago who has a penchant for wearing a suit and tie to church. I am a retiree who decided I had enough heat and wanted to retire where it was friendly and frozen. Or I am a snow boarder, with a nose ring, who likes hanging out at Stowe. Everybody here has a persona and an interesting story.

The disciples were also experiencing a considerable amount of confusion about Jesus' identity. "Who do people say that I am? Jesus asked his disciples. Well, they replied, some people say that you Jesus are Moses, the man who led the Israelites out of Egypt through the wilderness towards the promised-land. Others say you are John the Baptist that—rebellious bearded, boisterous and irascible trouble-maker from Galilee, who ate locusts and organic honey for lunch and who called on people to repent. Or some say you are Elijah the prophet from the Northern Kingdom (not the northern kingdom in Vermont) the one in Israel. Or still others say you are one of the other prophets who spoke up for the poor and made kings shake in their boots. And all these descriptions of Jesus were true on some level because there were qualities of all these people who made up Jesus' persona and informed his ministry.

But then Jesus became more personal and asked the disciples to say who they thought he was. Peter boldly put it out there, Jesus you are the Messiah! Now that is a rather grandiose sort of title which would surely have stroked Jesus ego and scored a few points in the ecclesiastical lunchroom. The Messiah, for many Jews, was often equated with a just and righteous king who would restore Israel to

its former prosperity and glory. It would not be unlike what presidential candidates promise.

But Jesus instead of taking the opportunity to boast about who he was or where he was from, sternly told the disciples to tell nobody. Don't tell a soul. How very odd. Why did Jesus ask the disciples to keep their lips sealed and not spread his fame around? Why could he not revel in the disciple's high compliment? I think Jesus did not want to make the title of Messiah all about him. And more-over, he did not want people to make a superficial judgment about what his Messiahship was really all about and avoid the hard work of living a life of faith which was not marked so much by glory but the struggle of the cross. Jesus was concerned that the title "Messiah" would distract the disciples from thinking more deeply about what it means to live a life of faith. When Jesus said, "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," He was trying to say that if we want to understand his essence, then we need to lose ourselves, be generous in our spirits and give our hearts to someone else. For you see in Christ the most important thing is not your title or social location, the most important thing is that you get your heart right and give it to God. It's about what is going on in our insides and not what we look like on the outside! When following Jesus becomes the focus for our lives we share a new identity with all kinds of people regardless of their geography or title. Jesus wants to talk with us about the quality of our love and caring. People might not always understand why we follow Christ. They might not always think we are all that cool. We might not always fit in. But over time, when we love well, when we stretch ourselves, and when we stand up for principles of love and justice, we begin to discover Jesus' incredible life essence which will enrich and animate our lives.

You know, our task as disciples is not to secure membership in some elite ecclesiastical club defined by location, denomination, race or income. Instead it is our life work to respond to the radical grace of God by enlarging our hearts and devoting ourselves to creating on earth an ever- expanding circle of love. Here in Vermont we are creating a marvelous fusion where we blend together an incredible variety of gifts and sensibilities not to glorify ourselves but to glorify God and create a new taste all together. As we begin our ministry, I have dreams of doing many things with you in a very excellent way. Together we aspire to great things. But perhaps what should animate us the most is the excellence in our loving, the excellence of our care for each person, and the excellence of our hospitality. Or as Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's a new definition of greatness. Everybody can be great because everybody can serve." ¹ We don't have to have a fancy title to serve. We don't have to have a bunch

¹ "The Drum Major Instinct" by Martin Luther King, Jr. preached February 4, 1968.

of letters after our name to serve. We don't have to wear bell-bottom or straight-legged jeans to serve. We don't have to be a life-long Vermonter to serve. We don't have to be a brilliant teacher, scientist, lawyer or pastor to serve. We don't need to be the most popular kid at school to serve. We don't need to have strong knees or a perfect smile to serve. We don't need to be in the United Church of Christ or be a Baptist to serve. We only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And we can be that servant.

Let us together pick up Jesus' cross and follow him as we lose our lives to find our lives in order to glorify the one who loves us so much.

Amen.