

SERMON for Sunday, September 17, 2006
Mark 8:27-38

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Identity Theft

I was recently reading a book by Ann Rivers Siddon in which the main character, a young girl of twelve on the cusp of adulthood, whose mother had died in childbirth, described why she changed her name...*she was six years old, on the first day of her first year in elementary school. For all her short life she had been called Prilla or sometimes Priscilla, her first name, the latter usually when she was In Trouble, but that stopped with rocklike finality when the first scabby classmate began to chant, 'Prilla, Prilla, mother-killer.' By the time the entire first grade in the Lytton Grammar School had taken up the refrain, Peyton McKenzie had been born...her Aunt Augusta said... 'What's wrong with Priscilla? It's a lovely name. Generations of your mama's family have named their daughters Priscilla...You should be proud.' 'Peyton is my middle name...It's a much mine as Priscilla.'* Her name was a part of her identity, what she thought about herself and her place in the world of her family and her small southern town.

Another version of this matter of identity is played out in that rather silly TV commercial of impersonation of a credit card holder, and all the stuff charged to someone else. If any of you have had your credit card or drivers' license or other personal information stolen, or if you suspect you might be on someone's hit list for such a theft, you know how important that identity is. And when someone threatens to take it away, it is as if a piece of you is vulnerable and susceptible, as if you are somehow diminished. When identity theft is possible, we are wary, suspicious, cautious of revealing too much of ourselves to one another. Even friendliness and kindness and neighborliness are suspect.

The gospel lesson for today, the question of Jesus' identity, is repeated in one way or another in three of the four gospels, in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. While Jesus and the disciples were together, Jesus began the identity dialogue with the question *Who do people say that I am?* What a curious question. *Well, some people think you are like John the Baptist, talking about how we have to get our lives straightened out and repent of all that bad things we have done. And some people think you are like Elijah, who told of the Messiah, and some people think you might be like Jeremiah or another prophet.* Oh, those disciples came up with all kinds of good ideas and impressive titles. They regarded him not only with affection but with respect and awe, fully aware that he was more than a great teacher. But Jesus did not let the matter rest with this recitation of what his experiences and credentials might lead the public to think. Instead, he asked another question, far more telling, far more challenging. *It is one thing to know what the public perception of me may be, but for you, your personal life, your experience, your faith – who do you say that I am?* And the answer is perhaps the most important question a disciple, in any place or time, can answer. For it is not only the answer, but the meaning of the answer for your life, that shapes your identity, as much as the name you were given when you were born, the name you might have taken on in childhood or adulthood, more than your family's ethnic name or the nickname everyone has called you since you were a baby. And no matter how many credit cards might be stolen, this identity cannot be taken away.

Almost a year ago a strange moment happened in a New York City courtroom, when Jose Luis Espinal, age 42, appeared before Judge Diane Lebedeff and made an unusual request. He petitioned the court to officially change his name to Jesus Christ. Now in his native language of Spanish, Jesus, or Jesús, is a common name, but that is not why he sought the change. He told a newspaper reporter, *I am that person. Basically my lifetime work is fulfilling the Scripture. There are some very deep, deep issues with this name change. Some of it may be very difficult to comprehend and deal with.* I would like to read a follow-up story, and learn of how his life has changed. Did he know what his name change might mean for his daily life?

Who do you say that I am? Of course, Jesus was not seeking any set of right words, or right phrases, any correct answer or interpretation with this question. He was instead speaking of a right relationship with the Son of God. *Who do you believe I am? And what will you do about it? Are you willing to not focus your entire life on human things but on the divine, on the kingdom? Are you willing to take up your cross and follow me? Are you willing to lose your life for my sake? Are you willing to let the name of Jesus Christ shape your very life?* That is the critical question Jesus asks all disciples. And it is a question whose answer is fraught with danger. Most of us have contented ourselves, and in fact have worked very hard at shaping our identity. We have numerous ways of thinking of ourselves, a number of categories that define who we are. Where are you from? Where do you live? Where do you go to school? Are you single? With a partner? Do you have children? What do you do for a job? What sports do you like? What are your hobbies – sewing, woodworking, gardening, reading? Do you go to church? Which one? What is your political party? Even the kind of car we drive, the clothes we wear, the places we shop for our food become nametags of sorts, pieces of our identity that we put together over the years. They change, of course, as we age and as our life circumstances shift. But do we ever get around to answering the question, *Who do you say that I am?*

Episcopal minister and writer Barbara Brown Taylor, in her new book *Leaving Church*, tells of a boy in her high school. And I want to share the whole story with you not to make anyone feel guilty, but to help us think together about the question Jesus asks, and what our answers might be. Taylor writes, *When I was a junior in high school, my boyfriend Herb played on the varsity basketball team. He was not the star player, however. The star player was a boy named David, who scored so many points during his four-year career that the coach retired his jersey when he graduated.. This would have been remarkable under any circumstances, but it was doubly so since David did not play on Friday nights. On Friday nights, David observed the Sabbath with the rest of his family, who generously withdrew when David's gentile friends arrived, sweaty and defeated, after Friday night home games. David would sit there in his kippah, openly delighted with the blow-by-blow description of the game. While the Shabbat candles still flickered on the supper table, every light in the room was on a timer. When one of them clicked off (signaling bedtime), all David had to do was nod and one of us would turn it back on again. We were David's Shabbat goyim – his gentile friends who could do things for him on the Sabbath that he could not do for himself – which sometimes included making popcorn in the kosher kitchen. I still remember the night someone asked David if it did not kill him to have to sit home on Friday nights while his team was getting slaughtered in the high school gymnasium. 'No one makes me do this,' he said. 'I am a Jew, and Jews observe the Sabbath.' Six days a week, he said, he loved nothing more than playing basketball and he gladly gave all he had to the game. On the seventh day, he loved being a Jew more than he loved playing basketball, and he*

just as gladly gave all he had to the Sabbath. Sure, he felt a tug, but that was the whole point. Sabbath was his chance to remember what was really real. Once three stars were visible in the Friday night sky, his identity as a Jew was more real to him than his identity as the star of our basketball team. Remarkable.

That is the question that Jesus asks. Who do you say that I am? And the second question, *Are you willing to take on that identity with me?* It is not an outer identity, of course, not a matter of taking a Lake Edge name tag home with you and wearing it everyday, or adorning yourself with religious jewelry or putting a pithy bumper sticker on your car or even wearing a clerical collar. During the first few years of my ministry I was surprised by how a casual conversation in which I was engaged, on a plane or in a social setting, could come to a screeching halt. *What do you do? I am a pastor of a church.* So much for that! Either the other person would politely excuse themselves, or begin a convoluted explanation of why they don't go to church anymore, or begin a confession of personal transgressions that I certainly didn't want to hear, at least not in that time and place. After a while, I found other ways to answer: *I am a teacher. I am a counselor. I work with a non-profit organization.* And then, of course, I was consumed with guilt because I was unwilling to claim the name of Jesus. That has become less of an issue, as I have discovered that many of my colleagues have shared that experience, as I have discovered that my image matters to me less and less, as I have reached down inside and been more willing to answer the question for myself and answer to God. Taking on the identity of Jesus means a new way. *Who do you say that I am?*

This is a gospel today of questions and not answers. It is a dialogue between you and Jesus Christ. How you respond this day will change your name and change your life. Amen.