

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 wish to come after me, 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.”

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

One thing I learned in college and grad school that I haven't thought about in a while is how to use research and data to support multiple sides of a discussion. But,

being in Seminary has taught me that I have an obligation to share differing research with you. So, I have prepared 6 mini-scenarios for you that I will deliver over the course of 3 weeks and 3 gospels.

First, I will describe someone using real quotes and some historical information, and I want you to see if you can figure out who I am talking about. Next, I will examine well-respected, well-researched information which is widely accepted by many groups of people, including Christians.

As the world becomes more educated, many topics in history are being explained with new evidence and points of view. So, I want to challenge your long-held beliefs regarding some very difficult topics.

This, my friends, is about showing you how many fellow citizens and Christians see the world, through science, research and prayer.

In the end, what stance you take on a topic is 100% between you and God. Just like the age old debates of “Does cilantro taste like soap or does it taste fresh?” or like the internet phenomenon of the Blue & Black vs White & Gold dress, we are destined to see issues differently. That is part of free-will. Once you have looked at your views and the views of others, you have the choice to continue steadfast in your beliefs or to adapt and change your beliefs. Neither is right. Neither is wrong. Both are ways to “Take up your own crosses”.

In today’s gospel, Jesus asks His disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” They throw out all sorts of

names—John the Baptist, Elijah, maybe one of the prophets. But then Jesus gets personal: “Who do you say that I am?” Peter, always quick to speak, declares, “You are the Messiah.” It’s a powerful moment, but it’s also followed by one of the sharpest rebukes in the Gospels. When Peter tries to talk Jesus out of the suffering He’s about to endure, Jesus tells him, “Get behind me, Satan!” What’s going on here? Why is Jesus so tough on Peter, the very disciple who just called Him the Messiah?

Jesus is teaching Peter—and us—that following Him isn’t about avoiding hardship, controversy, or chasing after others for confirmation of your beliefs. It’s about something much deeper, something that requires us to let go of our own expectations and embrace a path that’s often difficult and countercultural.

Here we go:

1. Who do people say that I am? I am someone who speaks their mind and am not afraid to challenge people and their beliefs. My job is to raise questions that align with the constitution to which I was called. Sometimes, the words I speak cause tears of joy and explanations of “That is exactly what I needed to hear right now. Thank-you.” While others, upon hearing the exact same words, have been uncomfortable and have felt the need to explain their thinking to me. I appreciate that.

Who does History say that I am? My people have a relatively progressive history, particularly in terms of social justice, inclusion and advocacy. Therefore, we are often seen as aligned with and encouraged to be engaged in progressive stances. We are trained to emphasize the theology of grace and faith. We have a long-standing commitment to addressing issues like hunger, climate

change, immigration reform, and justice for all people. My people were among the first to accept women as leaders.

Who are we? ELCA Churches and Pastors

More History: In 2009 the ELCA Church became one of the largest Christian groups in the U.S. to fully welcome LGBTQ+ individuals into ordained ministry and began advocating for the inclusion of LGBTQ+. In 2019, we declared ourselves a "sanctuary church body" in support of migrants and refugees. ELCA leaders are often involved in public dialogue on issues such as racial equality, environmental stewardship, and economic justice. They have regularly spoken out in support of progressive policies, advocating for the marginalized and those impacted by injustice. We have also been part of interfaith efforts to address hate crimes, work towards reconciliation, and promote peace-building, especially in polarized or divided communities.

Despite (or because of) our progressive stances, the ELCA has faced criticism from more conservative bodies and some people have left, citing concerns over biblical interpretation. Therefore, we often navigate the tension between our commitment to inclusivity and justice, and the pushback from more traditional or conservative factions of people. But, the history of the ELCA is deeply rooted in a tradition of social justice, inclusion, and progressive theology. We have often been leaders in addressing social issues of our time, advocating for marginalized communities, and pushing the church to respond to contemporary cultural and societal challenges. Our work reflects our broader mission to live out the gospel in a way that promotes justice, compassion, and equality for all people.

(Taken from the ELCA website)

Who do I say that I am? I am me, simply doing what I was called to do - to speak the gospel through the words of the Holy Spirit to open your ears, eyes, and minds to the greatest of all commandments - love your neighbor - and also recognize that we need to treat “the least of them” like we would want to be treated, because none of us are any better than any of the people that I will reference. I am a sinner. You are a sinner. They are sinners. Nobody’s sin is better or worse than anyone else’s.

The Bible is complex when it comes to the issue of inclusion, and its message can be interpreted in multiple ways. Some passages, especially in the Old Testament, describe laws and practices that seem exclusive. For example, Israel’s laws regarding purity and worship, or prohibitions against certain behaviors, can be seen as setting boundaries that exclude certain groups.

However, other parts of the Bible, particularly in the New Testament with the New Covenant which is Jesus, emphasize radical inclusion and love. Jesus' ministry is often viewed as a rejection of exclusionary practices, embracing marginalized individuals like lepers, tax collectors, Samaritans, and other sinners. In Galatians 3:28, Paul famously writes, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," emphasizing unity and inclusion.

Whether the Bible supports inclusion or exclusion depends on which passages are emphasized and how they are interpreted. Early church debates over including Gentiles in the faith community, such as do and in Acts 15, are an example of biblical inclusion triumphing over exclusive practices. Conversely, some modern interpretations of certain passages are used to justify exclusion based on sexual orientation, gender identity, or

other factors, but many argue this contradicts the broader message of love and grace found in Jesus' teachings.

So, it's not accurate to use the bible to directly or explicitly describe exclusion of any group of people without acknowledging the broader themes of love, justice, and the ways Jesus and the early church broke down barriers of exclusion.

Taking Up My Cross:

- I will not be swayed by rhetoric that only serves pre-intended agendas.
- I will listen to and respect other people's points of view.
- For every social issue people disagree on or talk about, an argument can be made -using the bible- to support OR discredit their beliefs. But, I will not do that.

- Instead, I will honor your beliefs, but I will also offer other perspectives.
- I will use the bible to show the radical love that God has for all of His children.
- I will not tolerate, in any circumstance, using the Bible to demonize any group of people or to quantify one sin over another sin.

Now that I have laid out the views of the ELCA Church, to which Bethel is a member, I will start with the real “Who do people say that I am” scenarios:

2. Who do people say that I am? “I have been called a monkey and have repeatedly been the punchline to jokes. I have been labeled as a sellout and claimed I am going to hell.”

Who does history say that I am?

Despite the continued intolerance in the U.S, the situation is changing . A large-scale, nation-wide survey conducted in 1958, 2013, and 2021 shows that tolerance for these people has grown from 4% to 87% to 94%.

Who are we? We are inter-racial couples

More History: Prior to the colonial period, mixing races was common throughout the world. But, as European powers expanded, and especially with the rise of racial theories justifying slavery, interracial unions became heavily stigmatized in many parts of the world. The 18th and 19th centuries saw the institutionalization of racism, where laws were introduced to control and criminalize interracial relationships.

During the early to mid-20th century, interracial relationships, especially between Black and white people, were harshly condemned in the United States, especially in the South. People in such relationships faced social

ostracism, legal repercussions, and even violence from groups like the Ku Klux Klan.

The history of interracial couples is a mix of oppression, legal battles, personal courage, and social progress. While once prohibited and heavily stigmatized in many parts of the world, interracial relationships are now more accepted, though cultural and societal challenges still exist.

Who does the bible say that I am?

The Bible does not explicitly address mixed-race couples, but it does include several passages that mention relationships between people of different ethnic or national backgrounds. The biblical perspective on these unions is often rooted in religious or cultural concerns rather than race as we understand it today.

Moses, a Hebrew, married Zipporah, a Midianite woman. The Midianites were descendants of Abraham but were

culturally and ethnically distinct from the Israelites. In Numbers 12, Moses' siblings, Aaron and Miriam, criticize him for marrying an Ethiopian woman. God defends Moses, punishing Miriam with leprosy for her criticism, indicating that God does not condone discrimination based on ethnicity.

The story of Ruth, a Moabite woman who married Boaz, an Israelite, is one of the most celebrated examples of an inter-ethnic relationship in the Bible. Ruth, a foreigner, becomes part of the lineage of King David and ultimately of Jesus Christ. This story highlights how a foreign woman is fully accepted into the Israelite community because of her faithfulness to God.

Taking Up Their Cross: Mildred and Richard Loving were an American couple who were the plaintiffs in the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967. The Lovings married legally in the District of

Columbia in June of 1958. But when police raided their home in 1958 and found a pregnant Mildred in bed with her husband and a District of Columbia marriage certificate on the wall, they arrested them, leading the Lovings to plead guilty to cohabitating as man and wife in Virginia.

The New Testament places a strong emphasis on spiritual unity in Christ, often downplaying ethnic or social distinctions. Ephesians 2:14-16 says "For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility." This verse

emphasizes the unity of believers in Christ, suggesting that ethnic or racial distinctions should not divide the Christian community. While this does not specifically mention marriage, it underscores the idea that spiritual unity is more important than ethnic identity.

God's purposes transcend ethnic and cultural boundaries, and the union of people from different backgrounds can be part of His divine plan.

Many of us, when we grew up, played the game "Eeeeny Meeeney Miney Moe" and I bet most of us know the phrase we used to say to end this. My point is, most of us would never say this today.

The more we know, the more we love. The more we know, the more inclusivity is a norm in our lives. The more we know, the more like Jesus we can be. Let us pray:

Heavenly Father: Open our ears, eyes and minds to all of the injustices in this world, then arm us with love and kindness to do something. Remind us that it is OK to not agree with each other, but also remind us that violence, hatred and exclusion were never the paths that Jesus took. Lead us, Father, to where you want us to go. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.