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Was Jesus Human or Divine?

Mark 8:27-30

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Before I launch into answering today's question, "Was Jesus human or divine?" I want to say that I believe this question is a great one and one worth answering well and about which we should have robust discussions. But I recognize that what really matters isn't what I think about the nature of Jesus. What matters is what you think and whether what we believe, each of us as individuals, about Jesus, inspires us to follow his ways. While I love a good debate, theology only matters when it influences the way we choose to live.

When I was young, in my grandparents' Presbyterian Church, I was taught that Jesus was both human and God. He was human so he lived life like we do, except he was God, so he never made any mistakes. The older I got, the more problematic this became for me. How could Jesus understand my life, or even serve as an example for me, if he never had to live with the consequences of mistakes? That was my entire adolescence, living with the consequences of my own nonsense. How could Jesus teach us about forgiveness if he never had the need to be forgiven? I asked a lot of people about this and was told that lots of things about God and Jesus are a mystery and part of faith was accepting the things we don't understand.

Well, if you know me at all, you know that wasn't going to be a thing. I'm all for mystery, but to again and again be told that my questions were proof that my faith was immature or lacking, left me feeling devalued and frustrated. So, with a whole list of unsatisfactorily answered questions and the negative experiences I had as a teen with churches and with Christians I made up my mind that I was done trying to construct any kind of faith in God. I couldn't relate to Jesus, a perfect, man-god and I struggled to relate to Christians who, not only behaved badly, but didn't seem to want to explain what they believed and why.

It wasn't until I met a friend who was a member of a Disciples of Christ church, married to the minister, that I decided to try again. I longed for community and appreciated my friend and her husband's willingness to answer all my questions

and I loved that they seemed okay with disagreement. They also were comfortable saying, "I don't know." The three of us talked a lot about the nature of Jesus, who he said he was, who his early followers thought he was, and how the church has traditionally understood him. Our goal was not agreement. What I learned for sure was that the way we treat each other's questions and doubts matters. I hung around because I was allowed to construct and live out my own faith, based on what I read and heard and experienced in that community. I invite you to do the same here. Your questions matter to me. Your beliefs and opinions and doubts are important to me and to this community. We are not gathered here to get everyone on the same theological page. We are gathered here to love each other, our neighbors, and the world.

Today's text is Mark 8:27-30:

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

Every time I read this passage, the last verse sticks out to me. Why would the author of Mark put these words in Jesus's mouth, "Don't tell anyone about me?" Why would Jesus not want people to know who he was? I mean...wasn't that the point of going from town to town, meeting people and encouraging people to follow him? If we would continue to read in Mark, going on to chapters 9 and 10, we would read that the very people (the disciples) who were so sure they knew who Jesus was repeatedly did things that didn't seem to mesh with the ways of Jesus. One example of that is in chapter 9 when the author of Mark tells a story of the disciples arguing over which one of them was the greatest. Knowing what you know about Jesus, is that something his followers ought to be arguing about? The disciples said they knew him, but they were still learning themselves and they got it wrong a lot. Maybe that is why Jesus would have wanted them to stay quiet. Maybe he thought they wouldn't get it right.

Who do you say Jesus is? There are so many answers to that question. In the decades after Jesus's death, a whole bunch of names for him emerged within early Christian communities. Many of those names have become Christological

titles or designations within the Christian tradition. In other words, the names people used for Jesus ended up being theological statements about who he was and what he did. The list includes messiah, Son of God, Word of God, Lord, rabbi, lamb of God, good shepherd, and others. Different communities used different names for Jesus, just as we are addressed differently. Some of these names express a high Christology, like Son of God, and others express a lower Christology, like teacher. In case Christology is a new word for you, let me define it. It is the branch of Christian theology that deals with Jesus's identity. High Christology relates to his identity as God, while low Christology relates to his identity as human.

Let's begin by looking at how Jesus might have thought of himself. Did Jesus think he was God? In the book, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*, biblical scholars Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright present their separate arguments regarding the nature of Jesus and work of Jesus. My own theology is heavily influenced by Marcus Borg and other theologians who have spent their careers reconstructing Jesus's life and teachings using critical historical methods, considering the context in which Jesus lived. In the chapter called, "Was Jesus God," Borg wrote, "I do not think Jesus proclaimed himself with any of the exalted titles by which he is known in the Christian tradition."

He went on to say, "Let me put the misgiving in extreme and provocative form: if you think you are the light of the world, you're not...perceiving oneself in such grand terms is a fairly good indicator that you're off base." Basically, if you must tell people you are a big deal, you probably aren't a big deal.

The point Borg makes is that a man walking around Galilee saying, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," would not have necessarily been well-received by would-be followers. How would a person saying those things be received by us? Imagine someone walking into the Fellowship Hall before worship or someone posting on our Facebook broadcast, announcing that he is the keeper of the way, the truth, and the life and that the only way to God was through him.

How would that encounter go? I believe we would be kind to that person. I believe we would offer that person cookies and coffee if he was here in person. I also think we would probably try to help that person by providing him information about where he might see a mental health professional.

If Jesus didn't say those things about *himself*, where did these names come from? Borg and other progressive scholars believe the descriptions of Jesus and names for Jesus that reflect a high Christology have their roots in the ways in which other people described Jesus, specifically communities of Jesus followers formed after Jesus's death. So, the way the gospel authors portrayed Jesus talking about himself was more reflective of what his followers said about him than what he said. Jesus's gospel voice represented not only the voices of the communities formed after Jesus's death, but also affirmed the stories circulating about the way his first followers (the disciples) experienced him. It was as if his disciples and early followers were saying "This one who was among us as Jesus of Nazareth is also the Word of God, the Son of God, and the Wisdom of God. In him, we see what God is like."

Going back to the example I used about the person coming into the Fellowship Hall promoting himself, how would it be different if a member of the church came in and told us about someone she enjoys being around, someone who seems to radiate light into the world, even in places where the world seems dark? And she shares that the person has a way of bringing life to situations that seem lifeless. That feels different, doesn't it? The question is, who are you more likely to want to follow? The person self-promoting or the one whose ways of light and life are being talked about and experienced by others?

My answer has always been that I would rather follow the one who is humble, the one who isn't elevating him/herself. So, there is that. And then, there is this. These high Christological images were never meant to be interpreted literally. They are metaphors. And that is obvious to us in some circumstances, like in the Gospel of John. In John, there are seven "I Am" statements in which the author's story has Jesus telling people about himself. Those statements are:

I am the light of the world.

I am the bread of life.

I am the way, truth, and life.

I am the true vine.

I am the resurrection and the life.

I am the door.

I am the good shepherd.

We know that Jesus was not literally a light, or a loaf of bread. These are metaphors the author used to write about Jesus, to explain the impact he had on the early followers of Jesus in his community. The definition of a metaphor is “to see as.” Jesus’s followers saw him as a light. They saw him as bread for the hungry. These statements were not facts about Jesus, but ways of understanding his life and his message. Is it possible, then, that the other ways in which the gospel authors talked about Jesus were meant to be metaphors as well? Is it possible that, rather than being the literal “Son of God,” the people understood him *as* the Son of God?

I am choosing the name Son of God to talk about because I would venture to say this is the name for Jesus that most Christians have learned is “the real one.” Those other names might be metaphors, but Jesus was literally the Son of God. Lucky for me, “Son of God” has its roots in the Hebrew Bible. In the story of the Exodus, Moses is told to say to Pharaoh, “Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son....Let my son go that he may worship you. In this context, Son of God refers to Israel. Another example is found in the book of Hosea. Hosea, speaking for God says, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” Again, the Son of God is Israel.

In addition, “Son of God” was also used to refer to the king of Israel. Nathan the prophet, speaking for God, said this about the king, “I will be the father to him, and he shall be a son to me.” And in Psalm 2, which was probably used for a king’s coronation in ancient Israel, the divine voice addresses the king and says, “You are my son; today I have begotten you.” Contrary to what is taught in many Christian churches, that psalm is not about Jesus. It was literally written for a king. In Job, angels were referred to as sons of God. And last, according to historian Geza Vermes, in his book, *Jesus the Jew*, around the time of Jesus, there were a number of different Jewish Spirit people who were sometimes called, “sons” of God.

With these examples in mind, Borg asks and answers the question, “What do Israel, kings, angels, and Jewish religious ecstasies have in common?” They all have a close relationship with God. He writes, “Son of God is a relational metaphor, pointing to an intimate relationship with God, like that of beloved parent to child.” This is what I believe Jesus’s early followers meant when they said Jesus was the Son of God. Let us not forget, that in the first century Jewish world Jesus lived in, sons could represent their fathers. They could speak for

them, do business for them, act on their behalf. It seems likely that Jesus's early followers would have experienced Jesus speaking on behalf of God, acting on behalf of God.

It wasn't until later that the idea of Jesus being the same as God, being conceived by the Spirit of God, not by a human father, was introduced, probably partially due to the influence of Greco-Roman culture and mythology that embraced the idea of demigods. The need for Jesus to be as big a deal as the Roman gods influenced early Christianity...and then created a bit of a problem because as a monotheistic faith, having God and Jesus, identifying both as divine, didn't work. We will save the history of the doctrine of the trinity for another day, though.

Living in a world ravaged by a pandemic, watching the news out of Haiti and Afghanistan, being aware of the inequality and injustice in our own country, this sermon may feel a little bit like splitting hairs. It may even seem tone-deaf to you as you worry about friends who are sick and people in your life who haven't been vaccinated. Does any of this matter, you may be asking yourself (and your neighbor). I will say this: In my own life, it has mattered because amid all of my books on history and theology, I discovered that I could believe Jesus was an imperfect human being, trying to change a world that seemed cruel, oppressive, and chaotic, and died trying, and still call myself a Christian. I didn't have to believe in theological constructs that didn't make sense to me. I could question and doubt and still be a follower of Jesus.

The same is true for you. I recognize that I have not presented an opposing viewpoint here today. There just was not time and, honestly, I would not have done it justice. I haven't done my own viewpoint justice. It's a big topic. I do not believe Jesus was more divine than you, me, or our neighbors. I believe we are all made in the image of God and some people, for some reason, are able to see and understand things about God that the rest of us just can't without a lot of help. Jesus was one of those people. It was easy to see God in Jesus. He came and he lived and, in his living, he revealed God. I know God because I know the stories of Jesus, but I don't think God and Jesus are the same. The Jesus that turned over tables, was a bit sarcastic, told stories, and loved messy people, that's the Jesus I can relate to, that's the man I choose to follow. And every time I follow him, he points me to God. And I think there is something deeply holy, beautifully divine, about that. I look forward to hearing about your path, your questions, and the

things you wonder about. We are better when we learn and grow together.
Amen.