

“Prophet and Gains”  
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Isaiah 50:4-9  
Mark 8:27-38

A small plane with five passengers on it had an engine malfunction and was going down. The pilot came out of the cockpit with a parachute pack strapped on his back and addressed the group: ‘Folks, there is bad news, and there is good news. The bad news is that the plane’s going down, and there’s nothing more I can do. The good news is that there are several parachute packs by the wall back there. More bad news is that there are four of them, and five of you. But good luck. Thank you for choosing our airline, and we hope you have a good evening, wherever your final destination may be.’ He gave the group a thumbs-up sign and was out the door.

A woman leaped up from her seat. “I’m one of the most prominent brain surgeons in the northeast. My patients depend on me.” She grabbed a pack, strapped it on her back, and leaped out. A man stood up. “I am a partner in a large law practice, and the office would fall to pieces without me.” He grabbed a pack, strapped it on his back, and leaped out.

Another man stood up and said, “I am arguably the smartest man in the world. My IQ is so high I won’t even tell you what it is. But surely you understand that I must have a parachute. He grabbed a bundle and leaped out.

That left only two people on the plane, a middle-aged pastor and a teenage boy.

The pastor looked at the boy and sighed, saying, “You take the last parachute. You’re young; you have your whole life ahead of you. God bless you, and safe landing.”

The teenager grinned at the older woman. “Thanks, Pastor, but there are still two parachutes left. The smartest man in the world just grabbed my backpack.”

Preaching professor Alyce McKenzie shares this joke to point to the importance of how we decide who, or what, we will stake our lives on will impact where we are going. There is much to lose, and there is much to gain. However, what looks like profit according to the world’s standards, may actually cause you to forfeit your life.

A group of disciples followed Jesus around, clearly because they believed there was something to gain by following this man. But how, they could not quite figure out.

We are all here because we want to follow Jesus. But *who* is this man we say we follow, and how will his ways profit us?

Before our daughter was born, Chris and I lived in a mid-rise apartment building in Chicago. Each day we were greeted by Phyllis, the security attendant in our building. From our first day, Phyllis always greeted Chris and me with warmth and welcome, often sprinkling our chats with a bit of local lore or gossip. She gave us updates on neighborhood developments, and cheered us on as we each updated her on our new jobs we had just started in Chicago.

When Phyllis found out I worked as a minister, it opened a whole new dimension to how we related. In most company, announcing what I do for a living can be a conversation stopper. Not for Phyllis. She loved God and

always seemed in search of a deeper spirituality. She spent the early afternoons, which were quiet in our building, in bible study and prayer. She loved going to church, and often told me about her Spirit-filled church she attended with her niece. She avidly read literature on spirituality, and would often share her latest reading with me.

Every time she showed me a book, she would say, “Surely you know of this author! He’s written lots of good books on the faith.” I disappointed her each time; I had not read any of her books. “Oh well.” She’d say, “Just pray for me, that I get on the right track.” I would tell her I will, and asked that she pray for me, too.

Because our style of talking about faith was not always the same-- I had not read the spirituality books she had read, and I did not sprinkle much God-talk into my everyday conversation, and while “Spirit-filled” at Phyllis’s church meant faith-healings and speaking in tongues, in my church “Spirit-filled” meant a nice, quiet moment in worship-- it sometimes made me feel uncomfortable that I may not fit into Phyllis’ image of who or what a minister should be. I imagined her ministers did not look or talk like me. Now, these are all assumptions and therefore may have been unfair... and even if my assumptions were accurate, they should never prevent us from having meaningful and friendly conversation. After all, Phyllis continued to be genuine and warm, even as I remained suspicious about whether I measure up to the image she would have as a minister.

I imagine many of you have this same problem in the faith. You worry about whether you measure up to what a Christian “ought” to be. Or perhaps, you make assumptions which are not particularly fair about what and who Christianity represents. When I am out at parties or socializing, once I share that I am a minister I sometimes notice a change in how people talk to me: they apologize for their curse words and the drink in their hands; they try to figure out how I can be a minister and a woman, or married, or gay; and they eventually drift to other parts of the room for

conversation. They have an assumption about what Christianity represents, and they figure they do not fit in.

Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Jesus knew how to warm up a conversation. I have often found that when speaking to people about something of personal meaning, it is easier to get them talking about what other people think than directly asking “what do *you* think?” For instance, in my work with teenagers in youth ministry, I have had more success asking questions like “what kinds of things do people at your school get bullied for?” Or “what ideas do your friends have about Christianity?” than asking direct things like “Have you ever been bullied?” or “what does Christian faith mean to you?” Once they open up about the less invasive question of what *other* people are doing or thinking, there is a chance they may open up about themselves more personally.

As for Jesus’ disciples, they had a few answers: “Some say you are John the Baptist. Others say you are Elijah; still others, one of the prophets.” Each of these answers was something worth staking their life on; John the Baptist, who a couple of chapters earlier in Mark gets killed off by Herod by beheading, would have made quite a splash, because his appearance would involve the resurrection of someone who had just recently been politically assassinated-- saying that though the state had killed him, he and his message had in fact lived. That is powerful! Elijah’s return, according to the book of Malachi, would bring forth the “great and terrible Day of the Lord”-- a kind of final judgment when God will come with a refining fire to bear witness against “those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear” the Lord, and reward those who had been faithful to God (Malachi 3-4). We know that the prophets courageously stood their ground in the face of powerful rulers, as they spoke a bold word inspiring conversion of people and nations. Clearly, Jesus’ ministry has created enough buzz in the land that people are associating him with the great names of the tradition.

But it is Peter who names Jesus as the Messiah. It would seem that Peter is like the child who gets the point of the children's sermon before the pastor reaches the punchline. No wonder Jesus ordered Peter not to say anything about it-- Jesus needed more time for the truth of who he was, and what he was doing, to unfold. And, let's be real: the Jewish concept of the Messiah was of a powerful king, who would achieve a final peace through military might; all the nations would fear him. To call Jesus, the wandering peasant preacher, a Messiah, would have been a huge irony at the time.

More than a Messiah, Jesus looked like Isaiah's version of the Suffering Servant. In 4 bits of poetry in Isaiah, we see this character emerge. In our passage from today, we hear that the suffering servant is beaten; his beard-- the badge of masculinity-- is plucked away; and he is insulted and spit upon. All these actions are ones that are meant to cause public shame. However, the speaker knows they have God on their side. Who can shame them? Who can cause disgrace? The only one in the court of judgment whose opinion actually matters has chosen the Servant's side; as for the others, "all of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up."

Likewise, Jesus predicts to Peter and the disciples that Jesus will go through great suffering, rejection, and even execution. "This is not the Messiah anyone expected! How can you say such things?" Peter demanded. But Jesus called to the crowd, warning them that following him will require loss. And then, this paradox: "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,<sup>[1]</sup> will save it."<sup>36</sup> For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?"

If we were looking at today's standards of profit and gains, following Jesus seems rather silly. But God's vision is so much bigger than what we can see by the limitations of today's standards of reward. It is a long view. It is a faithful view. And it is a view that offers *life*-- not just some far-off

promise of the glories of heaven, but something that offers *life* today, a life that is really worth living because it is a life of meaning, a life of purpose, and a life that is shared so that others may have life too.

Our task as Christians is not to try to fit into the mold of who other people say Jesus is. In Mark's gospel the disciples echoed other peoples' assumptions about Jesus: that he was John the Baptist, Elijah, or some other prophet. Our task as Christians is to name from the heart who *we* say Jesus is. The truth is, Jesus would rather that we name who he is in our lives than to follow someone else's assumption of who he is. Jesus can be the one who enjoys a good party, and can speak to a security attendant while she spends the quiet afternoon hours flipping through magazines and in prayer; Jesus can be present with a confused disciple and Jesus can be embodied in you.

Who do *you* say that Jesus is? What will you risk to witness to him in your life?