

Sept 13 The Limits of Public Perception Mark 8:27-38

When I was a kid, I really enjoyed the old television show *I've Got A Secret*. In that show, guests appeared before a four person panel. These guests had done something or had some skill that was highly unusual. By asking questions, the panelists tried to discover the guest's secret and each incorrect guess put a whopping \$5 in the guest's pocket. Guests could earn as much as \$80 for an appearance.

The show was on the air for more than a decade in part because we all love to discover secrets; almost as much as love telling them.

The first really sensational secret I ever heard was that Ms Wall, the fourth grade teacher at my school, was really a witch. If you didn't do your homework, she would put you in her oven and turn you into gingerbread. Later, I found out this was not true. She actually turned them into banana nut bread.

The secrets always swirled in my world. The reclusive man down the street had a dungeon beneath his garage. The dog next door had once devoured a postman. Of course, we found out that many of these secrets were not true. They were just scary or fun.

But some secrets were true. My cousin James told me he had bought a switch blade knife in Mexico and had it hidden in his room. His parents didn't know. I didn't believe his secret until he opened the box he pulled from the back of a drawer and I held the black and silver marvel in my hand and watched the blade open with the push of a button.

Later, I asked my mom, the softer of the two parents, if I could get a switch-blade knife..."I promise I'll be real careful with it and won't ever take it to school?" "I'm afraid that's out of the question," she said with a smile. "Young boys don't have any business with switchblade knives." "Yes we do," I protested. "You can ask James!" ...Ooops. (Listen, James still thinks his sister ratted on him, so please don't say anything.)

I found out that people sometimes keep secrets because they don't want the secret to hurt someone. When I was young, I was never told that my grandparents divorced. I thought the family split when my grandfather was killed, but in fact my dad's two sisters and a younger set of twins left with grandma, leaving my dad and two older brothers with my grandfather. My dad ended up in Texas when his father was killed, moving in with an aunt rather than with his own mother who lived 90 miles down the road in Tallahassee. Every family has family secrets.

But some people keep secrets to hold a position of power over others. Three neighbors and I had a secret club with a secret password, handshake and oath. Our club excluded the boys we considered unworthy. I'm not sure, but I think some of our civic leaders still have these clubs.

Intentional secrets create divisions within a group; between those who know the secret and outsiders who don't. Keeping a secret effectively cuts others out of a relationship. That's why they are anathema in a congregation. It's really messy to have everything out in the open, as Baptists know. But the alternative is worse.

So it is a little surprising that today's gospel story from Mark is about Jesus guarding the secret of his identity. Simon says that he believes Jesus is the Christ and Jesus commands the disciples not to breathe a word of it. It seems odd to us because we have been told all our lives that Jesus wants everyone to know who he is and that we should be telling them.

In Mark's gospel, however, there are five different occasions where Jesus commanded that his messianic identity not be divulged. In each of these reports, like our text today, there is a confession of Jesus' identity as Son of God or Christ; then Jesus commands that this truth be

held, not shared. If I told you not to tell anyone that Jesus was the Christ, you would burn me as a heretic. But Jesus said it at least 5 times.

Scholars have theorized about this secret keeping. Some say Jesus wasn't sure if he was the Messiah, so he didn't want that word to spread. Others say Jesus was using reverse psychology. By telling the disciples not to tell, they were sure to do it like children.

I don't find any of their exhausting explanations satisfying, so I've come up with my own speculation, limerick style.

**There once was a prophet from Galilee, who carried a secret identity
The crowds he impressed; he was put to the test
And still he remained an obscurity**

Jesus and the disciples were walking up to Caesarea Philippi and when I say up, I mean it was a climb. Along the way, they probably stopped to catch their breath and drink some water. Jesus asked the disciples to report what they were hearing from the public. He had not commissioned a Gallup poll, but we all know that we keep mental records. You know what people are saying about healthcare. You know what people are saying about budget cuts in our state. You know what people are saying about the coach of your team. "Who to people say that I am?"

Why do you think Jesus asked the question? Was he the consummate candidate, getting feedback on a message that would sell? I'm guessing a certain freshman quarterback from Michigan is going to surf the sports news to read what people are saying about his performance yesterday. Who wouldn't want to hear from those who thought you were phenomenal? Is that what Jesus was doing?

Some say he was using a very old teaching technique of how to introduce a difficult subject. Rather than ask the disciples point blank to confess their own beliefs, Jesus gave them a chance to try out some ideas in a non-threatening way. This was to help them grapple with the identity of their Master.

We should note that all the **perceptions** mentioned were **close, but off target**. There is a saying in psychology: "*we're all right, but only partly.*" That's what we see in this exchange. Jesus was like **Elijah**. He was like **John the Baptist**. His message was in continuity the **prophets**. The people were right, but were also missing the bull's-eye.

And that is true of me and that is true of you. It is true of every president, every congress, the people who march on Washington and your favorite commentator. It doesn't matter how many people agree with you. We may be right, but only partly.

But let's bring this home. "**What is the public's perception of Jesus' identity today?**" "If you stopped random people on the street in NY, in London, in Cairo, in Hong Kong...and asked them who Jesus was, what would they say?" (moving down to floor level) What did you put down? Let me see some of them.

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Has there ever been a person in all of history about whom there were so many different conclusions regarding his identity?

And what makes this more interesting is that in the gospels, Jesus does not seem eager to make sure everyone gets it right. In Mark's gospel, he makes no messianic claim. Why would

Jesus seem so disinterested in stating his identity clearly? If he knows the answer, why doesn't he give it? Teachers know.

I must appeal to Matthew's account for my speculation. In that text, after Simon's confession that Jesus is the Christ, Jesus says to Simon, *flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven*. That means, you didn't come to see me as Messiah because of anything I said or anyone else said. You came to this faith because of something God did.

We can and should tell people that Jesus is the Messiah, but that telling, that human act of communication, never gets them to confession. It takes an act of God. We can tell people they need to believe in Jesus, but that flesh and blood act of telling will never get them to faith. They have to hear God's voice.

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WHAT IF CONFUSION IS THE BIRTH PAIN OF CONFESSION?

Poor Ted had a bull's-eye painted on his back. His wife was a saint who had worked in the church nursery for years. No one was better with preschoolers. Ted, on the other hand, drank a bit too much. His wife always brought the best food to fellowships, but Ted was usually out playing golf. Vivian came to prayer meeting every week. Ted stayed home and worked in his shop.

So the church put the press on Ted; not once but constantly. Pastors told him he needed to make a decision for Christ. Visiting evangelists were even more direct. Concerned members would seek him out at the store or the bank or on the golf course to tell him what he needed to believe. And the more they told him, the more turned off he became.

I knew this history from his wife, so after playing golf with Ted a few times, never putting the press on him, I commented on his fortitude. "You must have a pretty good defense to hold off all the folks who have tried to get you down the aisle." He laughed and said, "Yeah, I'm ready for whatever you throw at me." His walls were up all the time.

"I'm not going to throw anything, I said. I figure it's all been thrown before. But if I promise not to put the screws to you, would you tell me what you think about Jesus sometime? I don't mean what you believe about our church, walking down the aisle, getting baptized; just what you think about who Jesus was."

He stopped the cart, looked at me and said a phrase I can't repeat. Then he said, *no one has ever asked me that before. They always tell me about Jesus. No one has ever asked me what I think about Jesus. I'll have to give that some thought. It's hard to look at Jesus when you have so many church people getting in your face*.

We had many conversations about Jesus after that. I don't think Ted has ever walked down an aisle, but I know he came to a place of believing that Jesus loved him and would save him. It wasn't anything I said. It wasn't flesh and blood. It was giving Ted enough room so that he could hear God and make up his own mind.

You just can't push people into faith. I think that's why Jesus didn't want his identity shouted from the mountain top. I think he wanted everyone to have the space and time they needed to hear from God.

No matter what any flesh and blood says about Jesus, believing that he is the Son of God and Savior has to be your idea and your decision. But today might be the day you get there, just like Simon.

