The Lord be with you.

I’m glad about this opportunity to read, study and reflect on the Apostles’ Creed together. When Pastor Ward brought up the idea I was excited.

Coincidentally, in the past four months many of the teens in our church have been learning the Apostles’ Creed—and a good number of them are committing it to memory. All of it. And it’s been such a joy to walk with them in this.

When we started this journey, one of the things I emphasized right at the start—and what I want to make aware to you, here, now as well—and what I want to make aware to you, here, now as well—is the potential danger of knowing about this creed, and even accepting it as true…but not affirming it. Do you know what I mean? It’s very easy and possible for anyone to read this creed and say, “make sense, sounds right, have no problems with it…so let’s go with it.” It’s so easy for any of us to stand up in this sanctuary each week for the next while and to read this creed together and…to go with it. But the purpose of the Apostles’ Creed is not so we can simply “go with it.”

Saying “I believe in God, the Father Almighty…” Proclaiming, “I believe in Jesus Christ…” Declaring, “I believe in the Holy Spirit” is a radical statement to be making; it’s a dangerous thing. I want to tell you this morning, why it is so dangerous…and why it is so necessary.

READ Mark 8:27-30

The disciples—and Peter in particular—were probably quite proud to have done pretty well. 2 for 2. Jesus asked them two questions. They answered both of them—and as far as we know, they answered correctly.

Now as we look at this scene—starting at Mark 8:27—we find it’s a pretty unusual one. Jesus and his disciples were “on their way…to the villages,” going as they had been, from place to place, preaching about the kingdom of God, healing the blind, the mute and performing miracles that astonished the crowds. The disciples also were astonished. All this was not unusual…but this exchange, this mini quiz…these two questions posed by Jesus to his disciples…this seems a little strange. What’s going on here? Why is Jesus asking these questions?

Jesus asks, “Who do people say I am?” (v.27) That’s his first question. Simple as that. His disciples reply, basically saying that there’s no consensus: “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” (v.28) Good. That sounds like a reasonable answer. People are just not sure yet what to make of Jesus: miracle worker? man sent from God? a man with a message?

The next question Jesus asks comes immediately—as if this were the actual question he was after all along (The first was just a primer). “But what about you? he directs to his disciples, Who do you say I am?” [Pause]

I suppose that if the disciples had the Apostles’ Creed in front of them, they’d come up with a pretty good answer. But they didn’t. But they didn’t do too bad either.
Peter speaks up for the disciples. I don’t think it took him long to answer. They all had been with Jesus for some time up to this point: again they had traveled with him from place to place, they had eaten meals with him, served meals with him...they knew the answer: **You are the Messiah** (v.29). There’s no doubt in their minds. This long-expected Saviour, the One promised for centuries, in prophecies—the expectation of generations and generations of an entire nation—Jesus is this one, he’s the Messiah. I can hear Peter say this, with his friends around him, as though it were a line in a creed—but better because he’s responding to Jesus himself—“You are the Messiah.” [Pause]

I want you to notice two things here.

**First**, remember who this group of disciples are. We have a fisherman...and a fisherman. And, there are two more fisherman. You get the point? These are everyday, ordinary people. They're blue-collar workers, no degrees (that's my guess), no one in a position of power—political or religious—just regular guys who Jesus calls to follow him, and they do. Remember how Jesus did this? He says, “Come follow me, and I will make you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19). That’s all he says, and they do—it—they drop their nets and they follow. I find that astonishing.

Back to the conversation—this Q&A in Mark 8. Notice, then, that Jesus gathers these ordinary, everyday kind of men and he chooses to reveal who he is, and his plans to them! The people, the crowds, the religious leaders—they don’t get him. Those observers, those on the margins just peering in as Jesus walks through and preaches in the towns...they don’t know him as the disciples do. They don’t get him. People say he’s John the Baptist, or he’s Elijah or one of the prophets. But the disciples know him—at least we can say they know the most of Jesus up to now. They say, **You are the Messiah**. You see, this is my first point: **Jesus makes himself known to the most unlikeliest of people.** We think it’s the smartest who get him, the richest who understand him best. But it’s never like this. We believe it’s the most loyal who know him, or the most senior, or most experienced (as if this were a union!). It’s not. Jesus makes himself known to the least of these: the meek and humble, the powerless, the children (9:37). Always.

**Next**, the second thing I want you to notice, and to look at again, is this second question from Jesus. “**But what about you? Who do you say I am?**” Jesus is getting to the heart of the matter with his disciples. “These people we’re ministering to, they’re not fully getting me; they’re not understanding what I’m teaching, the meaning of my actions, all these things. But what about you? Who do you say I am?” You see, Jesus is after the heart. He is personal. He is relational. Now...I think it was important to him that the people and the crowds would understand his message—and to be quite honest, there may have been some who did—but his focus was on the disciples. It was important for his disciples—his own disciples!—to truly and deeply know him. “It’s fine that the people around don’t know me yet. But what about you, **who do you say I am?**” [Pause]

Do you hear this as a question for us? For you? Yourself? I think it’s necessary for all of us to consider this question today. Whether you are just beginning or still exploring the Christian faith, eventually and hopefully, this is a question you will need to face and answer. Or, some of you may have been believing for years, you’ve walked with Jesus for awhile—this TOO is a question requiring an answer—not to me, or to the person next to you—but to Christ himself...“Who do you say I am?” [Long Pause]
There are many answers we hear in our world to this question of who Jesus is. Some answers—you may have heard or even considered yourself. I'll give you two responses; let me know if they sound familiar:

“He was a good man, but not God’s son or God himself. Wouldn’t go that far.” Or...

“He was a good teacher. Taught some good things, good words to live by. But not much more than that.”

There are a lot of responses like these, answers that praise Jesus as a man, but would not go so far as to acknowledge him as the son of God—or that he was divine. But our Bible tells us Jesus is the Son of God and that—just as our speaker mentioned last week—the only way to the Father is through the Son...John 14:6—“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

But because these notions of Jesus are so prevalent—that “Jesus was a good man, but not God”...how do we respond to these? Now this is important because you may be wanting to help a friend or colleague who thinks about Jesus this way—OR you may be wondering yourself. I want to point you to an excellent and classic response by C.S. Lewis, who wrote to this very issue, and in so doing brings the matter back—watch how he does this—he brings the matter back to the heart of the individual; this is vintage Lewis, listen to what he says:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic -- on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg -- or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. – Mere Christianity.

“He has not left that open to us.” Lewis emphasizes this point; it’s not an option for us to count Jesus as a “great moral teacher.” He is either Lord—and our Lord—or a lunatic. Jesus is either a madman, or he is the Son of God. We must make a choice. We must. [Pause]

When we read the Apostles’ Creed, I hope that we do so not simply “to go along” with everybody else. My hope and prayer is that we know what we are saying, and that we mean all that we declare.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son our Lord
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit
Born of the Virgin Mary

Peter gives the right answer. [We’re back in our story in Mark 8] When Jesus asks, “But...who do you say I am?” [Re-enact a classroom scene] Peter’s the first to raise his hand. Jesus points to him. And Peter gives the answer his teacher wants to hear, so he’s very eager and
wanting to impress and says, “You are the Messiah.” Now it probably didn’t go down like that...exactly. But can you see how proud Peter—and his disciples—could have been?

But here’s the thing: While Peter gets the answer right, he still doesn’t get Jesus. He doesn’t understand him.

Huh? What? Really? I thought it was only the people, the crowds who mistook Jesus to be John the Baptist, or Elijah or the Prophets. I thought Peter and the disciples gave the right answer. What are you talking about? Let me show you...but first I want you to read it for yourself:

**READ Mark 8:31-32**

What happens here? Remember, this is after Peter gives the “right” answer. He says, matter-of-factly, and correctly to Jesus, “You are the Messiah.” And what happens next? Well, what happens is as if Jesus says, “You’re right, Peter, I am the Messiah...and this is what the Messiah must do.”

And so Jesus begins to teach his disciples that He—the Son of Man—must what(?)...“suffer many things” and be...“rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be...killed.” He must: Suffer. Be rejected. And killed.

Now, to be sure, Jesus does also say that after three days he will rise again...but Peter it seems, before he even hears that, or registers what that means...Peter is already upset.

Can you see Peter’s reaction? Right there in verse 32, when Jesus “spoke plainly” about what must happen to him, Peter takes Jesus aside—CAN YOU see how absurd this is!? Peter the disciple, takes his master aside—and he begins to rebuke him. Peter rebukes Jesus.

Now, before we quickly go and wag our finger and shake our head at Peter...and go...“Peter, oh, Peter...” Before we do this...consider this: Are we so much different than Peter who wants so badly a saviour who ONLY performs miracles, who makes the lame walk and the blind to see, who gives good grades or that next promotion? Are we really that much different than Peter who wants a Jesus who is loved by the crowds—a teacher, a figure who everybody wants to see and listen to? Don't we also want to be associated with someone who is the toast of the town? Someone who gives our reputation a boost? Haven't we also, in the corners of our minds and in the depths of our hearts rebuked Jesus ourselves—or ignored him—whenever he speaks of suffering, or of rejection or of dying?

Stanley Hauerwas says this about the world we live in: “our culture has only a single fundamental belief—namely, that we are to fear death above all else.”

I can understand Peter, then. In our death-denying culture, in this pain-relieving world, in our anesthetized and numbed souls...I am like Peter and I cry out with him, "I don't want my master to die. Where will that leave us? What will that mean for me?"

But Jesus must die.

---

1 Exploring & Proclaiming the Apostles’ Creed, p. 115-6.
He must die on that cross, so that I can live. He must suffer, be humiliated, cast-off as a criminal even though he was innocent—Why?—so that the sentence of death we deserve can be paid off, wiped clean...so that we, though we are sinners through and through...so that we can be made righteous, holy and blameless before God. You see, it’s grace...we don't deserve it; but we’re given his love.

Jesus died, so that we do not have to.

Do you know the story of Jordan Rice? You may have heard. When I read about it, it brought me near to tears.

Last week, in the devastating floods in Australia, 13 year-old Jordan was trapped by an unexpected torrent of water. It left him, his brother and mother clinging to a tree. When a rescuer reached Jordan, Jordan told him, “Save my brother first.” The rescuer did, and in those moments the waters rose and claimed Jordan's life. He died. His brother lived. The boys’ father said Jordan was terrified of water, he could imagine at that moment the fear coursing through Jordan’s body. The father said, “He won't go down with any fanfare or anything like that - I don't think anyone will even wear a black armband for him - but he's just the champion of all champions, a family hero.” The news headlines read, “Teen boy sacrifices life so that his younger brother could be rescued.” And another headline, “Teen gives life to save brother.”

“Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” John 15:13

This is what Jesus accomplished for us with his death. He took our place. He died the death we deserved, so that we might receive what we don’t—life with God, union with him, life-everlasting.

[Pause]

But there’s more. There’s more. We can stop right here, and end...and it would be enough...but there’s so much more.

READ Mark 8:33-35

When Peter rebukes Jesus, Jesus responds. And boy, does he respond.

Now, Jesus rarely gets angry. The table-flipping incident comes to mind—but here is another. When Peter pulls Jesus aside and rebukes him, what does Jesus do? He turns, looks to Peter and says, “Get behind me Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns” (v. 33). Jesus knows Peter’s heart—he knows he is selfish, he knows Peter is afraid—he knows Peter full-well. And here he uncovers Peter’s divided heart. “You don’t care about what God cares about. You care is on yourself.” While Jesus is calling and forming disciples to abandon all else for God, he exposes Peter’s misplaced priorities. Jesus says, “Get behind me!” as if to remind Peter—rather firmly—who the real master in this relationship is. Peter is to follow. Jesus leads.

Now, on to verse 34. But before we speed ahead to Jesus’ famous words—we’ll get there—I want to take time to reflect on this interesting detail. It seems Jesus’ rebuke of Peter continues into verse 34...do you see this? It reads: “Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples...” He calls the crowd. He calls the crowd.

Now, from the beginning of this unusual conversation (v. 27) until now, it’s quite clear that the exchange is private—it’s between Jesus and his disciples. Remember, Jesus asks his disciples who the people say he is: John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. In other words—the disciples say—the people have you all wrong. Then, when asked who they say Jesus is—of course, the disciples get it right and say, “You are the Messiah.” But, as we’ve seen, they didn’t really get Jesus. What they get, through poor Peter, in fact is a stern rebuke. And then this...this beautiful bit of irony: in verse 34, presumably the same people the disciples wrote off, Jesus calls out to them—He calls the crowd!—and the text says what? **He called the crowd to him along with his disciples.** [pause] What I would give...you know, if I’m reading this right...what I would give to be there and to see the look on these disciples’ faces. To think that they had it all right, they had Jesus all figured out, that they had Jesus all to themselves...then this. Jesus **calls the crowd to him** with this disciples and issues these divisive, challenging and dangerous words (v. 34-35):

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.”

What does this mean for us? What does this look like?

These words mean that if we want to be Jesus’ disciples, we will not shirk away from suffering for the sake of the Gospel. Instead it means we will pick up our cross, we will follow him and be willing to suffer for the sake of the world just as Jesus did. The cross isn’t a showpiece. It’s a symbol of suffering, and a mark that—if I am willing to bear it, I am saying—“I am willing to suffer for the sake of others, your needs—no matter who you are, friend or enemy—your needs will come before my own. I will lay down my life for yours, just as my Lord did for me.”

And the truth is this: disciples of Jesus are only disciples of Jesus when **gathered** as disciples of Jesus. In other words, there’s no such thing as living the way of the cross by yourself, alone. As a whole church, united in our diversity, this is what we are called to...together. We’re called, carrying our cross, to withstand the temptation to bow to, what one preacher calls, “gods of comfort and convenience.” We are to withhold the urge to amass wealth just because we can. We are to resist the right to enact vengeance simply because we have the power to.

You know, I could keep going and going—I could keep talking about what we need to avoid, and what we must live for...but I want to stop, and just say what I want to say plainly and as clear as I can: If that cross propped on the roof of our church is high up there enough so that this neighbourhood might see who it is we bow to—then we better walk, and talk and live our lives so sacrificially that when people see us, they might see nothing else but the love of Christ.

I’m reminded of the apostle Paul’s words to the Ephesians (4:1) and I want to pass it on to you as a prayer: My prayer and hope is that our church, this particular gathering of sinners saved by grace, **would live a life worthy of the calling we have received.** That our singing of songs, our reading of creeds, and our acts of mercy and compassion; that our proclaiming of the Word, and our listening to the Word, our breaking of bread and our baptisms; that our sharing of the Gospel and our passion for missions...that all these things might be done, as
such, worthy of the cross we have received. Our prayer is that in all these things we do, we lift and glorify the crucified Son, our resurrected Lord.

Our calling is to deny ourselves, pick up our cross and follow Jesus.

If you’re willing to follow him, be ready to give an answer to this question from Jesus himself: “Who do you say I am?”

**READ The Apostles’ Creed slowly**