**Big “Buts” of the Bible**

**Mark 8:27-31**

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Big “buts” of the Bible. Man, I wish I could take credit for that title, or the blame. My grandmother probably would have yanked me by the ear for blatantly using such an innuendo. And for those who are familiar with Sir Mix A Lot, and rap music of a certain vintage, it even gets worse. We won’t go there.

We are not talking about the two “T” butt. Rather, we are talking about the one “T” but. That little ubiquitous word; that three letter powerhouse known as a conjunction in our English syntax that joins together sentences, phrases, clauses or words. Joins them together not in addition to (that is what the word “and” is for), but joins them together for comparison, to contrast. Did you even realize I used the word “but” in that last sentence? Probably not. It is so small and quick that we really don’t even register it. Rather (and I could have used the word “but” here) it cues our brain that the direction of the conversations is going to shift in another direction and set us up to be prepared for it.

I don’t even remember how I ran across it. I borrowed the title from Darin Michael Shaw who has a book by the same title – *Big “Buts” of the Bible: A Revealing Look at Jesus Christ*. His innuendo even goes a bit further. He introduces the importance of this little word “but” by telling the story of Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes.

As Shaw tells the story, in 1923 the Pan-American Conference convened in Santiago, Chile. The New York Times declared that this conference would be crucial, as tensions between South American countries were coming to a head; Argentina, Brazil and Chile were in an arms race, and posturing for war. Hughes was viewed by many nations as the only mediator who could ease tensions. He would have to be very clear on the various parties and their positions—especially tricky for an English only speaking man, as most of the dialogue would be in Portuguese and Spanish, coming to him through translation. It is said that Hughes gave specific instructions to his translators: “While a running translation is ample for my purposes, you must take great care to give me each and every word after any speaker says ‘but.’” His understanding was that words that follow “but” in conversation are often the most important words.

“But” can be a real game changer. Often it is a direct call for action. And in this first sermon in the series of “Big ‘Buts’ of the Bible,” we are going look at perhaps the biggest “but” of them all.

In the three synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) the Bible records a conversation that Jesus had with his disciples. He asked them, “Who do people say I am?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” Jesus said, “**But** what about you? Who do you say I am?” “But” brings the conversation home—this isn’t really about what others think, anymore. Jesus wanted to know what his disciples thought. It is also a question with which you and I need to wrestle. We know what the Bible says about Jesus. The purpose of the New Testament is to witness with story, example, and reasoning that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is the one who reflects the very image of God in Human form, who is able to speak with moral authority, teach with knowledge the ways of God, and whose very life, death and resurrection is the very act of salvation – to unite us with the purpose of God. The very first and simplest confession of faith found in the Bible is “Jesus is Lord.” “Lord” is a bit of an archaic term for us, but essentially “lord” is one who is the overseer - who has authority, control, or power over others. Lord is the one who is to be obeyed and deferred to. **But**, what about you? Who do you say that Jesus is?

It is not a question only for the disciples in our lesson today. It is a question for you and me to answer. What we believe about Jesus will make a difference in who we are, how we act, and the priorities with which we live our lives. Who we believe Jesus is will either help us move to prioritize with our life style the social and personal values that Jesus taught, or ignore him.

Believe it or not, there are more Christians in the world than anything else, even non-believers. As of 2015, according to a Pew Research Center, there were 2.3 billion Christians (This is 31% of the world’s population. Islam came in second with 1.8 billion or 24.1%, and “unaffiliated” was third with 1.2 billion or 16%). Now, since we are the majority, why is it that the world doesn’t look more like the kingdom of God on earth as Jesus expressed it? Why are there still wars and killings and poverty and injustice and discrimination? I suppose you could blame it on all the non-Christians. However, history has provided too much evidence that Christians behave very badly too.

We could blame it on the fall of Adam and Eve. Christians have been doing that since the beginning, even though I believe it is contrary to Christian Scripture. Paul says, by one man came death, referring to Adam; and by one man has come life, referring to Jesus (Romans 5:18-19). If that is what we believe about Jesus, why do we keep referring back to the fall of Adam when Jesus has already cared for that?

(Digression: At this point in my sermon writing I was debating with myself on all the other theological points I need to raise to make this a thoughtful comment, and I found myself running down a rabbit’s whole with no way out. So I decided to claim it and just get to the point I am trying to make)

If we confess to be Christian, if we confess that Jesus is Lord – the one whom we should obey, then why do our lives not reflect more closely the life of Jesus? Here is one thought, and I am sure there are others. We have not truly answered for ourselves “But who do you say that I am?”

We like to talk about Jesus in philosophical terms. Was he God? Was he human? Was he both, and if both how can that be? Did he need to be born of a virgin? Was it a bodily resurrection? And we base our Christian identity on how we answer these peripheral questions. Much like the way the disciples answered Jesus’ first question, “who do people say that I am?” It is objective endeavor. It’s got nothing to do with me. The question is have we answered Jesus’ second question: “Who do you say that I am?” I am convinced that when we are honest about answering that question for ourselves, our lives will be radically different, and we are not sure we want that.

Here are some examples: When you answer Jesus’ question, “who do you say that I am?” you may decide to give up all worldly goods and make sure the poorest of the poor are comforted and helped by your presence and work, as did Mother Teresa.

You may decide to speak out and work against systematic, political evil and genocide, as did Dietrich Bonheoffer in Nazi Germany, forfeiting his pulpit and teaching position and dying in a concentration camp.

And of course this weekend, we cannot overlook the person and the work of Martin Luther King Jr. There would be good reason other than being a Christian for Martin Luther King Jr. to work for civil rights. But it was God’s call on his life and his answer to Jesus’ question “who do you say that I am?” that set the tone, the respect and the success of his work.

As you may know, he was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1929 as Michael King, but in 1935 his father changed both of their names to Martin Luther to honor the German Protestant Reformer who was not afraid to speak truth to power. Martin skipped two grades in school, and by age fifteen, had passed the entrance exam to Morehouse College. There King felt drawn into pastoral ministry. He said, "My call to the ministry was not a miraculous or supernatural something. On the contrary it was an inner urge calling me to serve humanity."

He went to Crozier Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania and received his Doctorate from Boston University, and became the pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama in 1952. He was actually ordained at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA, where his father was pastor, and served as the associate pastor while in school. Martin returned there in 1960 to co-pastor with his father. Simply put, King was a brilliant and articulate theologian. It was his faith that gave voice to the non-violent protest of segregation.

When King a new pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church was elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, which had just been organized to lead a bus boycott to protest segregated seating in the city buses, this is what he said. "We must keep God in the forefront. Let us be Christian in all our actions." He went on to say that blacks must not hate their white opponents. "Love is one of the pinnacle parts of the Christian faith. There is another side called justice, and justice is really love in calculation.”

You can go on line and search quotes of Martin Luther King Jr. When you do you will see that his whole being and the root of his movement to end segregation and to bring about civil rights for all is in his understanding of who Jesus is.

For instance, taken from his papers written in February 1957, he says:

All men, created alike in the image of God, are inseparably bound together. This is at the very heart of the Christian gospel. This is clearly expressed in Paul’s declaration on Mars Hill: “. . . God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, . . . made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, . . .’’ Again it is expressed in the affirmation, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” The climax of this universality is expressed in the fact that Christ died for all mankind. This broad universality standing at the center of the Gospel makes brotherhood morally inescapable. Racial segregation is a blatant denial of the unity which we all have in Christ. Segregation is a tragic evil that is utterly un-Christian. It substitutes the person-thing relationship for the person to person relationship. The philosophy of Christianity is strongly opposed to the underlying philosophy of segregation. Therefore, every Christian is confronted with the basic responsibility of working courageously for a non-segregated society. The task of conquering segregation is an inescapable must confronting the Christian churches.

Jesus asks, “**But** who do you say that I am?” Mother Teresa, Dietrich Bonheoffer, Martin Luther King Jr. and many others answered with Peter, “You are the Christ,” and their lives could not be the same thereafter.

Jesus is still asking the question. How will you and I answer?