

*Intimacy: Into Me See*  
*Who do you say that I am?*  
Mark 8:27-30

Pretty much every time I counsel with couples who are going to be married, I quote the psychologist John Welwood, who says this: when we are very young—from very shortly after we're born—our parents go to work to shape their new child into the kind of person they want their child to be. They do this with love; it's their job as parents. They discourage the behavior that does not fit their image of their child; they applaud and reinforce the qualities they admire. And it is largely this parental influence, Welwood says, that begins to create in children their own self-image, their identity.

At adolescence, we begin to do this for ourselves. We choose friends who see and appreciate in us the qualities we like about ourselves, friends who are similar to us in those ways, or who like the same things we do. This too is part of human development; it helps us figure out our identity, who we are, for ourselves.

By young adulthood, he says, we have a pretty set picture of ourselves. This is necessary, Welwood says, to claiming our identity in the world. Only if we know who we are, do we know where we belong and who we belong with.

But that healthy process of setting our identity and our place in the world, what we will look like to ourselves and to others, also draws some walls around us—walls that can get pretty rigid, walls we won't cross. By adulthood, he says, the identity we have claimed and chosen for ourselves can get so clear in our own minds that it becomes a little like the bars of a cage, locking us in. I like horror movies; I don't like comedies. I am the kind of person who works hard at school, but I don't do sports. I'm someone who dresses in this style. I *don't* sing. Our choices—about what to try, what we might succeed at, the kind of people we want to be with—are limited by what we already know about ourselves.

Welwood—whose subject is healthy marriages—says that the right partner for each of us is someone who comes along and rattles the bars of that cage we have voluntarily put ourselves in. Someone who says, “You don't have to be just that;” or maybe even, “To be good in this relationship you *can't* be like that.” “It doesn't matter if you've always barked at the first person to talk to you in the morning; you hurt my feelings when you talk to me like that.” “I know you don't like to fish; but how about trying it again, so that we can do it together?” This, he says—opening ourselves to someone who will keep asking us to think bigger about who we are—is what can make marriage, a lifetime commitment to another person, the most transformative relationship of our lives...and also the most annoying.<sup>1</sup>

Who are you?

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<sup>1</sup> John Welwood, *Journey of the Heart: The Path of Conscious Love*

It's kind of the central question of our lives, isn't it?

It is definitely the central question in Mark's Gospel, the story of Jesus and the people who, like us, were trying to follow him. Over and over again, the people in that story misunderstand who this Jesus person is, where he has come from, what he's trying to do. The disciples—Jesus' closest friends, people who saw him up close most days and listened to him talk all the time—seemed often to be looking at him with a sort of quizzical tip of their heads, as if to say, "I don't get it. Who *are* you?"

In the piece of the Gospel that we read this morning, Jesus and his disciples are having another one of those "who are you?" conversations.

Jesus asks them, "Who do people say that I am?"

It's a dangerous question, and the disciples are caught a little off-guard. Should they tell him all the things they've heard and overheard along the way? "No one's quite sure," they finally answer. "Some people say you're the re-incarnation of John the Baptist. Some say you're like Elijah, the greatest prophet." And then the harder news: "Some people think you're just another prophet, like all the others who pretend to speak for God."

I imagine it was quiet for a moment. And then Jesus asked an even more dangerous question. "Who do *you* say that I am?"

Peter jumped in, because he knew the right answer. "You're the Messiah," he said. 'You're the hero we've been waiting for.' I bet inside his heart he expected Jesus to award him a gold star or something, because he knew, even when everybody else was still kind of fumbling around trying to find the right words.

Only that's not what happened. Jesus didn't reward Peter. He didn't say, "Good job, Peter—you are the only one who understands me." Instead, Jesus began to tell them things that—if he was right—would mean that he wasn't anything like the triumphant, all-powerful Messiah they thought he might be. "I'm going to get killed," he said. "Your people—our people, the people who have been looking for the Messiah—they're all going to turn against me. It's going to be terrible; suffering is involved. I'm going to have to carry a cross—something that can kill you...and you are too, if you follow me."

"No!" Peter said sharply. "Stop talking like that. Get hold of yourself. It doesn't have to be like that. You're better than you think you are. You really are the Messiah. Get yourself out of that negative thinking!"

Jesus responds to Peter's pep talk in a way that sounds harsh when you read it in the Gospel. "Get behind me, Satan!" he says to Peter. Often when we read this part of the story we shake our heads and say, 'Oh, that Peter—he was always sticking his foot in his mouth.' But I don't think that's what Mark is telling us here.

When else in Jesus' story did we hear something like "Get behind me, Satan"? When in our lives do we use the expression "Get thee behind me, Satan"? Not when we're strong...it's when we're *tempted*. Jesus wasn't mad at Peter. I think Jesus reacted so strongly to Peter's think-positive advice because there was a part of him that wanted to be that heroic figure in Peter's vision, *not* to have to go through the suffering part. Maybe when he said, "Get behind me, Satan," he was talking to himself, reminding himself that the identity God was calling him to was different from what *anyone*—even his biggest fans—saw in him.

All of us are shaped by what other people think of us, who they see us as, the behavior they expect of us. And in many ways, that is a good and necessary thing, as John Welwood reminds us. We need people who will be our mirrors, who will reflect back to us who we are—when we're our best selves, and when we are not. The Celtic tradition speaks of the *anam cara*, the soul friend who will see right through the mask and pretensions we have to put on out in the world. In Buddhism there is the idea of a *kalyana-mitra*, the noble friend, who will gently and firmly confront you with your own blind spot, correct your vision for what you cannot see in yourself. Western psychologists would call this a "constituting other," the person whose relationship helps you know your own identity.

Even the presence of God is shaped by relationships. Jesus needed disciples who would become him later. God needs us now to show the world what holiness looks like. It mattered to Jesus what his followers saw in him. That's why he asked, "Who do you say that I am?" But this story from Mark's Gospel tells us that Jesus wasn't only what other people thought of him. What Peter saw wasn't the full picture of what God wanted and hoped for Jesus. The mirror Peter held up reflected an image that was distorted, too small. Even with love and devotion in his eyes, Peter saw Jesus through his own dreams of a miracle messiah, someone who would make the path smooth and easy. And maybe just for a moment, Jesus was tempted to adopt that seductive image for himself.

But then Jesus remembered. He remembered that God's hope for his life was bigger. Harder, but bigger. It was God he needed to return to as his mirror. Only by looking to God could he find his ultimate definition, the fullest picture of who he was, who he was meant to be.<sup>2</sup>

That's true for us too. Do you know that experience of recognizing some truth about yourself—I'm in terrible shape, or my life has gotten out of control, or I really am not well—and you tell someone who loves you and they say, "No, you're fine just the way you are. You don't need to change a thing!" Even the people who love us best don't always call the best out of us.

Much more than articles of belief or doctrine, faith is about choosing God to be your mirror. Letting *this* relationship define you, give you the picture of what your life can be, should be. And letting that image draw you closer and closer—to who you were created to be, and to the God who has great hopes for you, and will stay with you, no matter how hard the road that takes you get there.

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<sup>2</sup> Photos from <https://www.picturemosaics.com/photomosaics/id/180>