

Mindless Imitation

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James 3:1-12 Mark 8:27-38

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I'm sure you've heard and seen news about plots to sow disinformation online or in the media or through A.I. bots sent by Russia, China, or Iran in this election season. We're hearing about stolen votes, whacky portrayals of candidates or policies, immigrants eating cats and dogs. Media influencers have been duped into spreading lies and distorted propaganda to warp perceptions, scramble opinions and promote conspiracies. Thankfully, most of us are aware these stories are manipulated by AI and bad-faith actors... But it's kinda scary right? Who do we trust and believe? How do we know what is true to avoid being seduced by rumors and mindless imitation?

In our scripture today Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answer with all sorts of half-baked answers they'd heard on the street: "one of the prophets, Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist"... They didn't have the internet, but they did have the grapevine. "I heard it through the grapevine..." Jesus was coaching the disciples how public opinion manipulates reputations and distorts facts. Disinformation is not new. Loads of people don't think for themselves. So, Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter answers wisely: "the Messiah." Yes! Peter got it! Bing! Bing! Bing!

Then Jesus explains what it really means to be the Messiah in his first prediction of his passion: *"the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again."* "No!" Peter cries. "That's not who the messiah is meant to be!" Peter has a shallow idea of what it means to be the chosen of God. Jesus rebukes him saying, *'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'* To be a true teacher and follower of God is to experience sorrow, hardship and agony on the pathway to blessing. It's not to be deceived by human misinformation, but to take up our cross and follow him.

Peter, it seems, bought into the formulaic version of the messiah; the two-minute trailer, the empty calorie snack, the sound-bite. This is how too many of us approach our own choices – swallowing what others throw at us in the media, buying into simplistic answers. Jesus yells at Peter to think twice, to be wise, and not to just swallow what gossip throws his way. He calls for him to consider the authentic path to salvation through service and compassion in the shadow of the cross; to listen to his teacher, and not to accept easy answers.

Let me share with you an old Sufi story. It's about a traveling holy man, who wandered from place to place with his donkey, teaching and praying and going to ceremonies, accepting donations from those willing to give. He lived a simple life, often sleeping in abandoned temples or villages, lying under the stars. One evening he heard thunder in the distance, and considered where he would lodge for the night. He had a few coins he had saved, and decided that he would stay in a local inn. He led his donkey into the town, and located the inn, which was a bit run down, but would be adequate. He spoke with the innkeeper, and saw that he would have to find a bench in a corner by the fire. The holy man took his donkey across the road to a small stable, and gave the stable boy a few coins to watch his donkey. Then he said his prayers and found his place at the bench by the warmth of the fire.

What the holy man did not know was that a band of local robbers had been watching his every move. They saw him lead the donkey to the stable; and after he left they strode in and surrounded the stable boy, pushing him and insulting him. While several held him down, others grabbed the donkey and led it down the road. They took it to a horse trader and sold it for a certain price.

Then they ran to the market and spent all the money they received for the donkey on baskets of food – fresh bread, choice fruits, wine, and pastries. They hauled the heavy baskets back to the inn, since that was the only public place in town, and they hired a musician along the way to play music for them. They burst into the room where the holy man was napping, waking him suddenly. One shouted that they were having a party that night. They spread out the food and suddenly dozens of people were dancing and shouting and gorging on the food, including the holy man, who was amazed at his luck.

One man jumped up on a table and began chanting, "The party's on, the fun's begun, the donkey's gone, the donkey's gone!" "The party's on, the fun's begun, the donkey's gone, the donkey's gone!" Over and over again. Everyone began chanting with him, with the holy man shouting louder than anyone else: "*The party's on, the fun's begun, the donkey's gone, the donkey's gone!*" Now everyone: "*The party's on, the fun's begun, the donkey's gone, the donkey's gone!*"

This went on late into the night, until everyone collapsed in heaps on the floor. In the morning, the sun streamed into the windows, and groggy bodies woke and stumbled out to home or work. One of the last to wake was the holy man, who found himself alone in the room, littered with garbage from the party the night before. He found his bag and cloak, and shuffled out to get his donkey and to go his way. He entered the stable, and looked around, seeing empty stalls and no donkey. He became upset and found the stable boy, and began to yell at him.

"I paid you to watch my donkey. What happened?"

"Stolen," he mumbled.

"How could you allow that to happen," the Sufi screamed.

"There were too many. I couldn't do a thing."

"Why didn't you come to get me? I could have fought them."

"I tried to tell you," the boy exclaimed. "At first a few of the men guarded me to keep me from telling you, but after the party began they went across the street to join in. I snuck over there, and looked in a window. I saw the thieves and everyone yelling and dancing, and then I saw you, singing along with the others, "The party's on, the fun's begun, the donkey's gone, the donkey's gone." I heard you and figured that you knew about the donkey because you were singing that song. How was I to know?"

The Sufi holy man was silenced by that. He nodded to the boy, and started walking down the road, grieving for his donkey, tears streaming down his cheeks. He was heard to say as he walked, "God save me from mindless imitation. God save me from mindless imitation."

God protect us from mindless imitation. God protect us from swallowing untruths and shallow sound-bites and for going along with the flow. God save us from not recognizing our savior, who is not only the messiah, but also the suffering servant.

So here we are now in this church being asked to chart a new course toward what is true and worthy and faithful. You are now grieving the loss of your pastor and are on a pilgrimage to seek a new spiritual leader for this congregation. Like the disciples of old, you will need to sort through opinions and half-truths about what your future will be, who will be best as a new pastor, what it means to be church in this harsh religious environment. Your talented and faithful pastor, Jeff, has departed for a creative career exploring new religious frontiers. Now the work begins to sort through your path forward – with all of your opinions and disagreements.

Jesus is asking you, "Who do you say that I am." In other words, what does it mean to be a follower of our Savior now, today, here in Glen Ridge? What's your calling? What do you seek? What are you striving to accomplish? And who will be the right person to guide you into a new chapter in your rich story? Our teaching today reminds us that being a person of faith is not all ease and light – it can mean taking risks and unpopular stands for compassion and peace in the shadow of the cross. The road ahead will not be all clarity and joy.

You've been blessed to have long term pastors, and music directors, who have offered spiritual depth and wise leadership, people like Jeff Mansfield, Tom Mustachio, Cyndy Reynolds, David Stinson. And some of these leaders have stepped aside after their tenure, causing the church to go through times of transition and uncertainty. Now you are in one of those times. Ironically, I've been around long enough to see you go through this several times. My wife, Martha, was an associate pastor here starting in

1988 – when I was a youth minister in Summit. We lived in the parsonage here on Appleton Place for four years. During that time, I grew to appreciate this church's rich traditions of inspiring worship, community events, its glorious music and choral concerts, its mature leadership, its uplifting holiday traditions, its outreach to those in need. The list goes on...

I'm sure you planned and hoped that Jeff would follow that model and settle in and raise his kids here and put his shoulder to the plough. Sadly, that didn't happen. So, now you grieve, as you have grieved others – like your beloved Cindy who passed away recently. Now it's time to remember all that Jeff gave you, and wish him well. Then, let's pick up our dashed hopes, and move on – with faith in God's purpose and vision for this beloved community.

As people of faith, as disciples of our Savior, as people of integrity and spiritual depth and vision – we carry on. When times get rough we grieve and begin again. Believe me, this world desperately needs what this church has to offer. We live in a time when young people feel lost in a world that seems to only value money and the funniest memes or quips on social media or cool pix on Instagram. Too many people have bought into the idea that their houses, shiny cars, or electronic gadgets define their identity, who compare themselves to others based on fashion or politics or ethnicity as their only truth. But Jesus teaches, we don't have to buy into shallow opinions or mindless chatter. As people of faith, we have thousands of years of wisdom and beauty and tradition to draw on. We don't have to accept other people's mindless imitation based on nothing but fads or conspiracies. We seek what is true and faithful, not just what is shiny or feels good.

Let's pray for God to guide this church to find a spiritual leader who is truthful and courageous. Now is time to savor memories of gifts Jeff has handed to you, his wisdom, stories, jokes, lessons and kindness. Take stock, be clear minded, remember the best of these past years, respect your journey of grief, and remember resurrection is real. Wonderous vistas and truths await you after your journey through the shadowlands. Thanks be to God. Amen.