

September 12, Ordinary 24B (Mark 8:27–38)

The cross we choose to bear reveals who we think Jesus is.

by [David Keck](#) in the [August 25, 2021](#) issue

This passage contains one of Jesus' most powerful questions: "But who do you say I am?" It also contains the striking directive, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take their cross and follow me." These two lines compel each of us to ask ourselves not only who we think Jesus really is but also just how far we are willing to go to follow him.

It would be so much easier if Jesus asked, "Who am I?" Then we could repeat the answers we have heard all our lives—the second person of the Trinity, God incarnate, the Messiah. But he asks us to name what we ourselves actually believe, so we cannot hide behind what we have been told are the right answers. The cross that we choose to bear probably reveals who we think he really is. I have picked up my cross and followed, but at times it seems like I chose the smallest cross I could find.

This question and this directive vex and challenge. The passage's final sentence also makes us think twice: when he returns in glory, he will be ashamed of "those who are ashamed of [him] and of [his] words." There are so many things about Christian life, faith, and history that I am uncomfortable with, if not outright ashamed of. Together, these three sentences could seem like two body blows and a knockout punch. Jesus rebuked Peter; something worse could be headed my way.

But I have come to regard this statement about being ashamed of Jesus and his words as profoundly comforting.

I am ashamed of some of Paul's words, particularly about slavery and women. I could add other passages of the Bible that I am ashamed of. I call myself a Christian, and sometimes the sacred text that is to liberate and govern my soul makes me cringe. But when it comes to Jesus' words and actions as recorded in the Gospels, I

cannot think of any that make me ashamed.

There are sayings I do not understand and moments that surprise me. There are certainly situations that I would have handled differently. (When your friend Lazarus is about to die and needs you, it would seem that you drop everything and go, not hang out for a few more days.) Still, Jesus is just alright with me.

I am also ashamed of some parts of the history of the church. The Crusades, burnings at the stake, the punishments meted out to “sexual deviants.” I sometimes imagine Jesus looking down from heaven and crying out, “WTF! Did I suffer and die for this?” As a historian by training, I recognize the importance of appreciating particular social and historical contexts, and I realize that exporting the mores of the 21st century to previous eras is problematic. Still, it hurts deeply to see how the followers of Jesus at times have nailed people to their crosses rather than carrying them.

It hurts because, as a Christian, I am part of this history. The Bible is my text, and this is my story. It does not seem faithful to pick and choose, to claim all the good parts while denying, ignoring, or minimizing the bad.

This passage from Mark has helped me to appreciate the faithfulness of Christian shame. One of the benefits of shame is that it teaches humility, and I believe that Christians need humility. A church sign I saw recently helped me to appreciate this.

I won't include all the particulars. Suffice it to say that this southern church claims, without irony, that it has been proudly proclaiming the truth for almost three centuries. I understand the importance of institutional confidence, and I appreciate a church with a legacy. But what was the truth during slavery, or during the civil rights movement? I think it was that Christians did not have to read the Bible very hard to find justifications for profiting from the violence of slavery.

Shame may or may not be one of the crosses that Jesus is thinking of in this passage. But one of the crosses followers of Jesus need to bear is shame for the ways our sacred text and our history have caused harm and have been unfaithful. Shame prevents us from making an idol of a book, a building, or a history. Shame for what we have managed to do brings me back to the fact that while I may wrestle with Jesus' words or deeds, nothing he said or did causes me shame.

But, if I am honest, that's not entirely true. The puny size of the cross I've chosen to tote around makes me ashamed; the fact that Jesus bore his cross at all shames me even more. I'd like to be proud of being a good person, but I am one of the crucifiers. I empathize with this description from one of Jesus' parables: "The tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'" (Luke 18:13).

"Who do you say I am?" You are the one who died on a cross for our sake. That is a cross we have to bear.