

What God Wants to Know: Who Do You Say That I Am?

Philippians 3:7-11 Mark 8:27-35

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that 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. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him (Matthew's version: "This will never happen to you; God forbid it!") But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

This is the word of the Lord.

This morning we have an age-old question that is still asked, wondered about, and debated today: who is Jesus Christ? So many books have been written about this over recent decades, like Phillip Yancey's *The Jesus I Never Knew*; or John MacArthur's *The Jesus You Can't Ignore*. And Marcus Borg's *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. This topic is on the cover of some magazines once a year around Eastertime. Time, Newsweek, and especially Life

magazine used to devote an entire issue to this question around Eastertime. So it continues to be an oft-asked and relevant question, both inside and outside the Church (by religious and non-religious folks).

As we reflect on this important question that Jesus asks, I'd like to begin with an important and instructive observation:

That is, this question comes two years into Jesus' public ministry and the disciples' journey with him. Think about that. One might assume that Jesus would ask for a statement of faith *before* they follow him: "I want you to follow me and be my disciple, but first you must answer this question correctly: who do you say I am?" No. At the outset, he simply issues an invitation: "follow me." No requirements or qualifications. Just a willingness to embark on a journey of faith and discovery.

Then, he waits until they have been with him for at least two years before he puts this important question to them. By then, they had heard his teaching and his parables; they had witnessed miracles like the feeding of the 5,000 (which takes place right before this conversation); they had been part of his healing ministry and had seen amazing things there (there was also a healing right before this conversation). They listened to his arguments with the Pharisees and the

teachers of the law. They had watched him love the unlovely, extending mercy and grace, and witnessed his exhibition of the Kingdom of God. *Then* he asks them the question.

And in asking the question after 2 years, they were being called upon to come to some conclusions about all they had seen and heard. The unspoken preamble to this question is, “Now that you’ve taken all of this in, who do you say that I am?”

Obviously over two years Jesus did not spend much, if any, of his time talking openly about who he is. He didn’t say “Hey people, I’m the Christ, the promised messiah; do you get it?” He spent his time talking about *the Kingdom of God*. With oblique references to ‘the son of man’ and what will happen to him.

And now, the disciples are at a teachable moment. And so he asks them, first, “Who do **people** say that I am?” In other words, what’s the popular opinion out there? And the disciples share what they are hearing. And btw, the ideas and opinions are as varied today as they always have been: he’s one of history’s great religious figures; he was a great moral teacher; he was a revolutionary; or, he is a fable, created by a Jewish faction that wanted to upset the religious order.

Then after asking about prevailing public opinion, the question gets personal. He asks, “But how about **you**? Who do *you* say that I am?” Again, he doesn’t just tell them (“Hey guys, it’s time for me to reveal who I really am...”). He wants them to draw their own conclusions, and so he asks. And, of course, Peter gives the great confession of faith—or *at least he has the right words*: “You are the Messiah.” The promised savior.

Again, this happens after two full years of following Jesus. And after Peter gives his response, then Jesus tells them not to tell anyone. And for good reason. Because, as we see, Peter had the right words, but a faulty understanding of what ‘Messiah’ meant. So, if they had gone about communicating that faulty understanding, it would have potentially led people astray.

One of the takeaways from all of this, one of the learning points: everyone needs time before they make a decision or a confession about who Jesus Christ is. No one should be forced to make a confession of Christ until they’ve either been around Jesus’ people for a considerable amount of time, or they have had time to think and reflect on it for themselves. Ideally both of those things happen in tandem. But either way, people need time.

Many past outreach and evangelism strategies pushed for the decision, sign the card, make the commitment, join the church, and whatnot. I think some of that pressure was applied in order to pad the numbers for the evangelism organizers. Or, to pad their egos! I've had people ask me, "How many people have you led to Jesus?" as if that's an important marker of success. My answer is always: I don't lead people to Jesus. *Jesus* leads people to Jesus! The *Spirit* leads people to Jesus. I might happen to be in the right place and the right time when someone wants to make a commitment of some kind. But if I try too hard to lead people to Jesus, on my terms or timeline, the results can be messy. People need time—on their end of things, to process what they are thinking and learning; and on God's end of things, to do the inner work, spiritually, that needs to be done in preparing people.

And especially in this time and in the culture in which we live, people need time—years, even—of just being around God's people, seeing what we do, watching us at work and worship and even participating in it, seeing the real Jesus at work in and through us, before the question is asked—at the appropriate time—who do you think Jesus is?

There is a wonderful documentary about Mother Teresa, about her and her work with the poorest of the poor on the streets of Calcutta. And in part of the documentary a group of reporters is interviewing her in a press conference. The interview takes place in a relatively comfortable hotel in Calcutta. One of the reporters asked her explain in detail about the work of the Mission of Charity, and her reply was simply, "Come and see." She refused to explain it; if you want to learn about it, she said, come and hang out with us for a while. Watch what we do and, better yet, help us do the work! We need you. Jesus needs you.

This was the early church's initial (and in my opinion, best) form of outreach and evangelism, which were actually simple forms of hospitality. Inviting people for meals, celebrations, participating in justice efforts, and, especially in Celtic and Indigenous expressions of faith, earth-keeping efforts (ie, ecological/environmental discipleship). "Come join us in the work we're doing" and "Come share a meal with us" were the invitations. There were no entrance requirements, no doctrinal or moral tests. Just an invitation to be part of a community that was discovering, together, who Jesus is. And following "The Way" as it was called (see the book of Acts).

I think a lot of people stay away from Christians and from the church because they think they have to get their act together *before* showing up—thinking that church is for people who have it all together, who have no doubts or questions or problems. We know that isn't true... we're here because we *don't* have our act together, right? We know that we need God's mercy and grace. And, we all have questions. Questions about faith will always come up at different times in our lives. We go through periods of doubt; sometimes brought on by intellectual curiosity, or because of events that happen in our lives or in the wider world that cause us to ask, "God, are you for real?" Or, "Is God good?"

This is all to say, it's instructive that Jesus waits a long time before asking the question to the disciples.

And just as Jesus stood before his disciples long ago and asked them, "Who do you say that I am?" the same question echoes down the corridors of time and comes to us and to all: who do we say that Jesus is? It's good for us all to reflect on that question from time to time (including pastors!), because we learn and grow and change, and our understanding of Jesus grows over time. We also need to reflect on that question because sometimes God's people in particular can get

off track in our understanding of who Jesus Christ is, and what it means to follow him.

I would assume that most people who are regular church goers would respond to the question “Who do you say I am?” by saying, with Peter: you are the promised savior, and the son of God. But I’m guessing that a lot of those same people struggle with denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following him every day, as he calls us to do. That part doesn’t sound like any fun!

I think this is why, as soon as Peter makes his confession “You are the Christ, the Messiah,” Jesus begins to tell them what that means: that he must suffer and die, and then be raised to life. Peter didn’t like that, and he told Jesus so, and Jesus in turn had to rebuke him. Pretty sternly. Even called him satan. How would you like to be called satan?!? (By Jesus, that is. Maybe you’ve been called satan by someone else...) Can you imagine if someone would have asked Peter how his day was going, what he would have said? “Oh fine.... my spiritual mentor called me satan, but other than that, it’s been a good day.”

But this shows us how seriously Jesus took his mission and his purpose, of fulfilling his mission by setting aside self, to the point of death, for the sake of the world.

And so, what this interaction also shows us is that Peter had the right words, but a faulty concept about who Jesus really is, and what it meant to follow him. And the same thing can happen to any of Jesus-followers. We know it happens because we see the misconceptions at play almost daily in the media.

I think there are two main misconceptions about Jesus right now in certain expressions of Christianity and the church:

1. Jesus as Conquering Hero; Rambo messiah; Jesus for President. This was Peter's misconception. And who can blame him; after all this was the prevailing messianic expectation of that time. They expected a powerful political and military leader who would overthrow the Roman occupiers and free Israel to be a great nation once again, the way it was when David was king. That's partly why people referred to Jesus as son *of David*.

Along that line, notice that some people thought that Jesus was the new John the Baptist, who preached fire and brimstone type judgment, and others thought he was a return of Elijah. Remember what Elijah did? He lined up all the false prophets of Baal, and all their gods, and called down fire from heaven which consumed them. The people loved that, they cheered for Elijah. And that's what the people expected their promised messiah to do.

So when Jesus tells Peter that he's going to go to Jerusalem and suffer at the hands of the authorities and be killed, that gets Peter pretty upset. That's not part of the plan!! It's supposed to be the other way around, Jesus: you're supposed to do **them** in!

Now, as we know, Jesus did line up all the false prophets—in a sense. But the roles became reversed. In a way he does destroy his enemies; not by killing *them* but by dying *for* them and creating a path for reconciliation and peace to happen. But Peter wouldn't find that out until all of those events came to pass—that there is a different kind of power at work with Jesus. I'll elaborate more on this next week, for Christ the King Sunday.

And there are many Christians who, like Peter, want Rambo Jesus... The conquering hero. It's the same misconception that led to things like the crusades and the inquisitions. And unfortunately, this misconception is at play big time today in certain religious and political ideology. And it's causing so much damage to persons, and to society.

2. The other misconception is just the opposite: Jesus as the soft savior who dispenses warm fuzzies. Or, as a friend of mine calls it, Jesus the cosmic busboy who is there at the snap of my fingers to tend to my needs and

clean up my messes; the convenient Jesus who doesn't really require much of me except to be a nice person. All of that deny yourself and take up your cross stuff was mostly hyperbole and symbolism; he didn't really mean that. In this view, Jesus' role in my life is basically to help me feel better and help me solve my problems. And in return, I promise that I'll try to be good.

And as we heard in our teaching from Jesus this morning, the call to follow him is a call, not to be just good or nice; nor is it a call to dominate and conquer. It's a call to become servants like Jesus. And we do that by choosing to "die before we die," so to speak. **Actually**, it's a call to become our true and best selves, in Jesus Christ. It's a gracious, if paradoxical, invitation.

The gospel is full of paradoxes and upside-down metaphors: we die in order to live; the weak are strong and the strong are weak; whatever is gain is loss (as Paul says in our Philippians reading); the last shall be first and the first shall be last; and, whoever wants to save their life shall lose it, and whoever loses their life shall save it. This all sounds very zen-like, Eastern philosophy. Which it is! Because, well, Jesus is from the east. And his teaching is brilliant.

Jesus says: in order to save our life, we have to lose it. And if we lose it, we'll save it. Deny ourselves and take up our cross... that doesn't sound very exciting, or enjoyable.

But when we take time to understand what that truly means, it becomes a gracious invitation and calling. Because it doesn't mean we make ourselves miserable. Jesus doesn't say you must make yourself miserable, as if it pleases God to see us making ourselves miserable. He says, deny yourself.

To deny self simply means we consent to the gracious will of God, acknowledging that we belong to God, who has the ultimate claim on us, and who knows what is ultimately best for us.

To deny self means setting aside my ego. Or, better, letting God integrate my ego and will with God's will. God doesn't want ego deflation any more than ego inflation. What God is after is ego *integration*. Where we become our true selves *in God*. As we let God take our will and ego and shape them into something beautiful. This isn't about annihilation, but animation. A life that represents our true and best self. Not someone else's version of myself. But God's best version of me.

Now, if this sounds difficult or confusing, that's understandable. This can be a hard teaching. But to believe that denying self leads to nothing but misery is to miss something very important in what Jesus is saying here.

In fact, it's to miss the same thing that Peter misses when Jesus says that he's going to suffer, be killed, and then on the 3rd day rise again.

Peter says... no Lord, that sounds terrible, that will never happen to you. But what is Peter forgetting about? The rising on the 3rd day part! All he hears is the suffering, Jesus going to the cross, and the deny yourself part.

He doesn't hear the *raised to new life* part. And that's the promise: when we can set aside self and ego, and follow Jesus (not Rambo Jesus, or warm fuzzy guy Jesus, but the Jesus who lays down his life, in love), when we follow that Jesus, we get new life... a richer, fuller life that can never be taken away from us. Paul: I want to know Christ *and the power of his resurrection!* In Paul's own words he's talking about denying self, taking up his cross, and following Jesus, which he describes as gain.

Jesus puts this way: if you try to find your life you'll lose it, but if you lose it, you'll find it. Again, that sounds a little zen, but it's true. Think about it, if we try to find our life... if we try to secure our own life... what do we get? We usually

get: anxiety, fear, and attempts at control. All that striving to get ahead, to be someone that I or someone else thinks I should be, grasping for more, or for control, makes us anxious.

But when we can follow the real Jesus, and let him integrate our lives, what we get is joy, and purpose, and contentment. And, a vision for the Kingdom of God among us.

Jesus' words sound like the ancient mystic Rumi: "I searched for God and found only myself. I searched for myself and found only God." Even our grumpy John Calvin said the same thing: "True wisdom consists of two parts: knowledge of self, and knowledge of God, and the two are intertwined."

Will You Come and Follow Me