

“Who Do You Say That I Am?”

Matthew 16:13-20

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

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Questions, Questions, Questions. Our life is FULL of questions. In fact it seems like there are serious questions confronting us everywhere. Questions about the state of the world—what exactly happened in Barcelona last week? Will Peace ever come to Palestine and Israel, and if so, how, by whom and for how long? Has anybody even noticed the rising death toll from mudslides in Sierra Leone, and if so, what exactly are we doing about it?? We are confronted by serious, life and death questions in our own country—white nationalists marching in Charlottesville, Boston and elsewhere; a presidential pardon for an Arizona sheriff notorious for the racial profiling of Latinos, immigrant and non-immigrant alike; from the question of transgender people serving honorably in the military, to the question of what to do about the opioid epidemic in this country. From the economic divide between haves and have-nots widening to the seeming inability of our elected officials to get something—anything!—done.

Right here in our own congregation, of course, we are dealing with our own big questions. Folks from our summer book study join others in asking questions about what we as individuals or as a congregation can do about racism white privilege. We have questions about some of the recent comings and goings on the CtK staff—when does the new organist start? How will the herald or the website be different? The generosity team has questions about how best to lift get the message out about supporting our ministry, while the finance committee has questions about how to balance the budget. Many among of have even deep questions about our life together: how come my friend doesn't come to Sunday School anymore? Why don't my kids or grandkids have a church home? These and other critical, questions confront us all the time here at Christ the King and in the world around us.

A couple weeks ago, we considered two questions from our bible readings—one addressed to Elijah by God, one addressed to Peter by Jesus—and said that these questions were ones we would do well to find answers for as well. Again today, we have two more questions addressed first to Jesus' disciples, but by extension addressed to us as well as modern-day followers and disciples of Jesus. The first question seems to be a more general question, almost a survey question, a question a pollster or political

strategist might ask: "Who do the People say that I am?" What's the word our there? What's my approval rating? Where do people stand on my vision, my plan of action? How am I being perceived? What's the buzz factor—the wow factor? How are our numbers? To whom are they comparing me out there? But pretty quickly, Jesus moves on to another question, one that is more pertinent, more personal, and one that, I believe can and should be asked of us today, too. He asks his disciples, those following him most closely: "And you, who do *YOU* say I am? "

Suddenly, it's clear that Jesus is not just interested in gossip or chatter or even poll numbers, he's not taking a survey or gauging public opinion. He wants testimony—personal testimony. He wants to know what his disciples think, what *they* believe, what *they* say.

I 've told some of you about my high school chemistry teacher in high school named Mr. Overbo, who was well known for his clever responses to students. If a student asked him "Why do we have a test today?" he would answer, "well, that's actually a two part question: the first part is 'why,' to which I can only respond by quoting Tennyson "Ours is not to reason why, ours is just to do or die." The second part of your question, "do we have a test today," to which the answer is, "Yes. Yes we do."

Similarly, I think Jesus' question to his disciples, and perhaps as importantly to us is really a two-part question: The first part is Who is Jesus? And the second part, perhaps more difficult to answer, is: who do we SAY Jesus is?

Who is Jesus? Of course there are several answers to this question. For some, Jesus was an exemplary man, one who gave the world a great example of how to live life. He taught his disciples to live in peace, to turn the other cheek, to be patient and loving. He preached tolerance, understanding, mercy, forgiveness. He demonstrated beyond his words that blessings belonged to those who are humble and gentle, those who think of others first, those who have a tender heart those who work for peace and justice. He was an exemplary man.

But Nelson Mandela was an exemplary man, too. Jimmy Carter, he's an exemplary man. Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Ruby Sales, Dorothy Day, Elie Wiesel, they all were exemplary people. But Jesus is more than that, much more than that.

For some, Jesus was a prophet of God. He spoke directly to people, calling them to change their lives by turning back to the Lord God. Speaking on behalf of God, he was rejected in his own village, among his own people. He did what God asked of him, remained firm with his vision, with his message, even when his words were not so popular, even when the authorities launched more threats against him and the people turned against him. He spoke the truth to power. He was a very faithful prophet.

But Moses and Elijah were very faithful prophets too. Micah, Amos, Ezekiel and Daniel, Isaiah and Jeremiah, Simon Maccabee and John the Baptist, they were all prophets of God. In our day too, there are prophets speak the truth to those in power. But Jesus is more than that, much more than that.

Some say Jesus was a teacher perhaps even the best teacher ever. His parables are good, concrete examples of how to teach the truth of God in way that is clear and simple, right for the context, timeless, yet practical. Through these stories, like the good Samaritan and the prodigal son, the pearl of great price and the workers in the vineyard, he taught people life lessons—how to live together across differences, how to forgive one another, how to find true happiness, how to gain eternal life. He began with a small group of students—disciples—who in turn shared what they had learned, took it and taught it to the ends of the earth. He really was a good teacher, a great teacher.

But, Socrates and Plato, they were great teachers, too. Confucius was a great teacher. Linus Pauling, Maria Montessori, Paulo Freire, Mary McLeod Bethune, they were some of the best teachers ever. And haven't each of us at one time or another encountered a good or even a great teacher? For me it was Gary Overbo and Diane Stewart, Lawrence Williams and William Kurth, Martha Stortz, Timothy Lull, and Ian Douglas. But Jesus is more much more than a great teacher, much more than that.

That's why Peter's statement is so radical. Peter says, Jesus is the Messiah, which is the Hebrew work for Christ, which is the Greek word for Anointed One, which in those days meant the one chosen by God to lead God's people. Peter goes on, to say that that Jesus is the Son of the Living God—the son, the only son, and as the church added centuries later “Of one-being with God the Father through whom all things were made.” The one and only son of the Living God, the real God, the one and true God. Unlike the exemplary human beings, the faithful prophets, and the great teachers who preceded him, Jesus is so much more. As Peter realizes and confesses, Jesus is the real deal. God's own Son. The one and only one sent by the one and only living God to lead the people of God.

That's a great response to this question—so great, we're told that on that response, on the rock of that confession Jesus was going to build his movement, build the church, with a capital “C.” And no force—not even the force of Hades—will prevail against it.

But then comes the tricky part for us—the implied second part of the question. Sure, we can confess with Peter, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Yes, we can second that motion, assent to that belief. We can sign on the dotted line as it were, adding our name to those who since Peter have confessed this truth about who Jesus is. Nowadays, it's as easy as a retweet—both a like and a share.

But what about the second part of that question: not who is Jesus, but who do YOU SAY Jesus is? Or maybe put it this way: believing what we believe about Jesus, how do we actually say *it*? Do we say it, or do we keep it to ourselves? How do we share that truth, that profession? How do we show it with our lives? What difference does it make to us, to our families, to our community, to our world with all its many questions and concerns what difference does it make that **we** believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God?

Jesus asks us, “Who do you say that I am?” It's a two-part question, and both parts of the question are important. Knowing who Jesus is, how best should we tell others?

So, church, I'll ask it again: Who do YOU say that Jesus is? Amen.