



Who Do You Say I Am?
Sermon by Deacon Heather Feltman
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“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asks. Who is Jesus?

That is a question Christians have been seeking to answer—to the world, to each other, to ourselves, ever since Jesus posed it to his disciples!

I knew who Jesus was when I was about 7 years old – I knew him as a guy who seemed to walk a lot to see and help people—from the bible stories I was told – and from the European white pictures I would see of him – he seemed to like to wear the color white and had a pet lamb!

But as I grew up this question became more complicated...just as it does for the disciples in our gospel passage for today. Jesus asks his disciples this question, “Who do you say that I am?” –and certainly by Jesus posing this question to them ---he raises the stakes with them.

We learn that Jesus is not interested in his poll numbers –or what the word on the street says he is – Jesus wants to know from this small rag-tag group of guys who they say he is. The group that will carry on his mission and ministry once Jesus is gone.

When I was about 16 years old – who I thought Jesus was took on a bit of a different form. I knew the essence of Jesus to be all those things I heard Amy Grant and Michael W. Smith sing about on their hugely successful Christian albums– Emmanuel, Prince of Peace—and I knew what seemed to be required of us –make sure you knew the ‘salvation’ formula for us to ‘sell’ to others.

Who is Jesus? As I get older that question seems to get more and more complicated. We learn that the disciples stumble around a bit too –what category does Jesus fit into? They share with him what they are hearing on the street – that he is like John the Baptist, or Elijah or Jeremiah.

It is not an easy question. I wonder if we sometimes too readily accept and settle for “Sunday Jesus” answers. You know the easy – feel good ones. The problem is-- life isn’t always easy – as all of us know—especially as we live through the year 2020! Who do we say Jesus is when we are faced with decisions that have no easy answers, when the night is dark and the storms of life overwhelm us, when faithfulness might mean taking a risk –standing out and taking on a power greater than our own? Who do we say Jesus is as people go to bed hungry, live amidst domestic violence, or work for a wage that cannot support a family? Who do we say Jesus is when a loved one dies, or the doctor gives us news we did not want to hear, or our life seems to be falling apart? You know the most significant faith confessions are not made in church assemblies or theological seminaries. The most powerful confessions of faith are made by people like you and me in those unexpected, unguarded moments, when the conversation goes where you never expected it to go and you can sense the Spirit’s presence right in the midst of it! At the end of the day –Jesus wants to know – Who is he to you?

I remember reading a short article in the Christian Century several years ago written by Peter Hawkins where he shares an unanticipated moment of confession in his life: He wrote: One August I was hiking with a few new friends...north of the Golden Gate Bridge...we climbed the crest of a ridge that placed us dramatically between the sky and sea. There we are with our picnic

lunch and we fell into a rambling conversation about politics, real estate values in an earthquake zone, and the virtues of sauvignon blanc over chardonnay.

Then I mentioned off-handedly that perhaps I viewed something the way I did was because I am a Christian. This revelation did not strike me as a big deal. After all, they had been talking about Buddhist meditation, Sufi parables and personal spiritual rituals. My saying that the Eucharist was central to my life did not seem out of place.

My remark turned out to be a gauntlet thrown down between me and them, a line unwittingly drawn in the sand. Was I really a Christian? Did that mean that all other religions were ‘wrong’?

That Jesus was the only Son of God? That he was born of a virgin? That he was ‘in’ the bread and wine? There I was, Peter wrote, confronted by people of good will and genuine loving kindness, suddenly made to be “The Defender of the Faith”, the authority on hard sayings and Christian claims.

Peter’s friends forced him to become like his namesake, Simon Peter, as they asked him: Who do you say that Jesus is? Peter’s grand declaration of faith to Jesus’ question elicits a wonderful response from Jesus, “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah!” But as we know, just a few verses later in this same chapter of Matthew when Jesus reveals to his disciples his impending suffering – Jesus responds to the answer Peter gives Jesus quite differently, with Jesus saying to Peter, “Get behind me Satan!” Peter has his high moments and Peter his low moments.

As an adult how I answer Jesus’ question has changed many times – spending many years serving in our Lutheran social ministry organizations –I have heard folks share with others that Jesus is God with skin on – Jesus did come and

live the human experience --God came to earth to be in relationship with us – to feel what we feel – pain, fear, hunger, uncertainty and even death.

Who is Jesus? As followers of Jesus, it means our answer to this question has probably changed at times over our lives –that is what believing is all about. Even after years of living in relationship with Jesus, Simon Peter struggled with the inability to articulate what he believed. And with his stumbling attempts to live into what he hoped he believed, you and I can find the courage we need to join our voices with the voices of those first disciples.

As we abide in the faith, we hear what came from Peter’s heart “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And as we join our voices along with Peter’s, we experience God’s blessing just as Peter did —Blessed are you...! Blessed are you!

We affirm that believing in Jesus Christ means –

Giving away what we have

Healing the world

Loving our enemies

Making audacious promises

All of our small statements – our affirmations of faith –knit together into little pieces grants us a picture of a deep and transformative faith!

I cringe at my own ability to believe at times – or how I answer Jesus’ question – as you can tell from over these many years they seem a bit wishy washy and nothing like the beautiful answer Peter offered Jesus. But Peter’s declaration of faith –has the breadth and depth of being the truth then and there – and it was the best he could come up with –Peter’s best seems pretty awesome

to me – “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!” It certainly wasn’t the answer the crowds on the street were saying he was!

Dear siblings in Christ, the reality is we are called to witness every day. People make decisions about Christianity everyday by what they see in our lives. You may be the only sermon people will ever hear. But please remember, we do not have all the answers, we don’t need all the answers --we only need to be open and honest as we can.

As we continue to grow in our faith and believe in God’s transforming power –let us keep asking “Who is Jesus to You? I am sure it is enough of a ‘right’ response whatever your answer –because you will hear Jesus’ voice will be whispering in your ears, “Blessed are you child of God!”

And as followers and believers in Jesus our journey goes on!

Thanks be to God! Amen!