

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 23, 2020

Who Do You Say That I Am?

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-20

“Today, we are having a ‘pop quiz’.” How do you respond when you hear those words? When I was in school, those were some of the most dreaded words. They meant a surprise quiz that we hadn’t known to prepare for. I remember only once hearing those words in seminary. I was a really good student and almost always had my work prepared or the assigned pages read. But on that morning, in my class on Christian ethics, it was a different story.

I was also serving as the pastor of a small church and there was a child in the hospital in critical condition. I had spent most of my time there. The assigned reading had not even been started. I had absolutely no idea how to respond to the question that was asked about the reading. I wrote about how Christian ethics meant making decisions about important things and that sometimes we had to choose between two things that were important. I had chosen to attend to the needs of the child and his parents and the church where I was serving.

We never know when we are going to face a “pop quiz” about something important in our lives. Most of the time, it won’t carry the weight of a grade for school, and we might not even recognize it as a “pop quiz”. But whether we recognize them or not, the “pop quizzes” show up with great frequency.

Jesus’ disciples were surprised by a “pop quiz” one day as they walked and talked with Jesus. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” That was pretty easy to answer. They had been listening. They knew what others were saying about Jesus. But then, it turned personal. He asked, “But who do you say that I am?” You can almost see them looking at their hands or the ground, off in the distance, or anywhere except at him.

But then Simon Peter saved the day. He was always quick to jump in and this was no exception. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” It was a good

answer. It was such a good answer that Jesus said the answer was not his alone but had come from God.

He called Peter “blessed” and then went on to tell him that he is Peter, and “on this rock, I will build my church.” In English, we wouldn’t recognize this clever play on words, but Jesus has just given this disciple a new name and a commission. We know him as Peter, but until now he was known as Simon or in Aramaic “Kephas” which means rock. Peter is the English translation of the Greek “Petros” which means rock. And on this rock, Jesus will build his church.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that Jesus used the same word twice, but in the first case he used the masculine form “petros” and in the second the feminine form “petra”. She points out that there is a subtle difference between the two words. “*Petros* – the name Jesus gives Peter – means a stone or a pebble, a small piece of a larger rock, while *petra* means a boulder ... a great big rock. So that makes Peter a chip off the old block, a piece of the rock, against which the powers of death shall not prevail.”<sup>i</sup>

William Barclay in his classical Biblical commentary says that this means that “Peter is the first stone of the whole church. Peter was the first of the fellowship of believers in Christ.”<sup>ii</sup> Barclay points out that Jews understood that God was the rock upon which they depended for safety, salvation, protection.<sup>iii</sup>

All this is very good, but just 6 verses later, in a passage we will hear next week, we find that Jesus calls Peter a stumbling block because he didn’t understand what his wonderful answer really meant. He had given a profession of faith, but didn’t know or understand, or even really want to understand what being the Messiah meant. His cultural ideas of who or what the messiah would be got in the way of hearing something new and different from Jesus.

Another commentator noted that the reminder that “Peter could move at warp speed from a foundation worthy rock to a stumbling block should be a useful check on our own tendency to believe that we cannot be mistaken about what God’s up to in the world.”<sup>iv</sup>

Our reading from Romans warns us about this “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

So, the question from Jesus comes to us today. “Who do you say that I am?” We may not hear that question directly from Jesus, and we might not recognize the question when it comes, but it does come – often when we least expect it.

“Why do you go to church every Sunday?”, or perhaps, today, more like “Why do you spend time watching that worship service online?” “I’ve heard people who claim to be Christians say mean hateful things, is that what you believe?” “Why are you buying extra food for the food pantry? Take care of yourself first.” “Do you really think that praying about something is going to make a difference?”

Anytime we encounter one of these questions, we are facing one of those “pop quizzes” and we are being given an opportunity to either affirm or deny our faith and to potentially make a difference in the life of someone else. In fact, just about anytime we encounter another person, we have an opportunity to be a witness to what Jesus really means to us. And much of the time we won’t even realize it.

I remember years ago reading a story about a Cub Scout leader who asked the boys in the den who they looked up to, who they saw as a good person. Several of the boys identified the man who owned the neighborhood hardware store. They said that he always had time for them. He was willing to answer their questions. He never made them feel like they were wasting his time. When he was told about it, the man said that from then on, he always thought about the young eyes that were watching him to learn how to be a good man.<sup>v</sup>

What sort of testimony do we offer about Jesus through our words, our actions, and our lives? Who do we say Jesus is in our minds and who do our actions say that we really believe he is? Quite a few years ago, I struggled with this very question. I was at a transition point in my life. I believed that God was calling me to ordained ministry, but I had a ton of reasons why that shouldn’t or couldn’t happen. I had lots of excuses and I was not at all shy about sharing them with God.

As time went on, what I came to understand was that with my lips, I was saying that Jesus was my Lord and that I would follow him and do what he called me to do. But here was a really big case of disconnect, where I was refusing to do what I couldn’t believe Jesus was telling me to do. I had played church as a child. When I was twelve, I wanted to be a pastor. But now I wouldn’t allow myself to believe that Jesus was

actually calling me to fulfill this secret dream. He had to be wrong. I was the wrong person. I am an off the charts introvert. The idea of speaking in front of people was really high on my list of things to avoid at all cost. My family life was a mess. I wasn't "good" enough. And yet, it seemed that Jesus kept persisting.

Eventually what I realized was that if I called Jesus the Lord of my life and I was refusing to do what he was telling me to do then for me that was sin. It was on Good Friday when I finally told Jesus that I would stop fighting. Truthfully, I expected that he would soon realize that he had made a mistake and I would be off the hook. Instead what happened was that all the obstacles that I saw as huge slowly started to become pebbles.

When I finally allowed my actions to fit with my words, I felt as if it were Easter. I felt a joy and a peace that I will always remember. In the more than 30 years since then, I have never once regretted the decision to do what Jesus was calling me to do. I have come to see answering that call as a sacred trust, an opportunity that I could never have imagined. Certainly, there have been tough times, but I never regret letting my actions match my words and letting my life witness to who I believe Jesus is.

Of course, sometimes I am like Peter. Sometimes I forget what it really means to call Jesus Lord and Savior, to call Jesus Messiah. Sometimes like Peter I prefer to do things my way and I try to convince Jesus that my way is the best way, or that he doesn't understand. Sometimes it's easier to go along with what the world seems to be saying than to be transformed by Christ and be open to hearing something different. At those times, Jesus once again reminds me that my job is to follow, not to lead and I try once again to bring my actions and words into alignment, so that my life is a witness to who I believe Jesus is.

I don't know how well I do with that. I'm sure that there are some people who think I do just fine with it, but they may not know certain things about me. I'm sure that there are some people who think I do a really terrible job with it, but they, too, may not know certain things about me.

I tell you this because I believe that Peter's story is mine, and Peter's story is most likely yours, as well. I doubt if any of us has been right on track all the time in following what Jesus calls us to do. I doubt if our words, actions, and beliefs are always

perfectly aligned. That's why Jesus didn't reject Peter every time he made a mistake. That's why Jesus doesn't reject me when I mess up. That's why Jesus doesn't reject you when you get it upside down or backwards. At those times, Jesus once again, puts his arms around us, gives us a hug and invites us to hang in there because he is hanging in there with us. At those times, Jesus looks at us with eyes of love and compassion and once again asks us, "Who do you say that I am?"

Jesus invites us to think about who we really believe that he is. He invites us to think about how we might respond to the next person who asks us why we keep coming to church, why we keep praying, why we keep serving in some way, why we do the things we do and believe the things we say we believe.

If you aren't sure where to begin with this, let me offer a suggestion. In a devotional book I read there is a selection from George MacDonald that tells us where to begin. Essentially, he says that we should start with the first thing that we think God is telling us to do. We should ask ourselves if today we have done one thing because God said to do it, or if we have refrained from one thing because God said not to do it. It's absurd to say that we believe in Jesus or even want to believe if we cannot think of even one thing he said that has made a difference in our lives. We can begin anywhere, but instead of debating it, just begin. Do something because Jesus tells us to do it.<sup>vi</sup>

Who do you say that Jesus is? What are you going to do about it? What one thing can you say or do today that would be in harmony with who <sup>1</sup>you believe Jesus is and what he is calling you to be and do?

Let us pray.

Loving God, you come to each of us and ask us who we believe you are. You come to each of us and ask us to live our lives in ways that witness to that belief. Help us to be open to you. Help us to be willing to have our lives challenged by you so that we can be transformed by you and that we may understand your will for the way we live our lives today and every day. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Brown Taylor, Barbara. "God's Rock" in Seeds of Heaven

<sup>ii</sup> Barclay, William "The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2, Revised Edition The Daily Study Bible Series c. 1975. P.141

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, p.140

<sup>iv</sup> Blue, Ellen in Theological Perspective on Matthew 16:12-23 in Feasting on the Gospels

<sup>v</sup> Paraphrased and recalled from memory. I read it in some book of illustrations.

<sup>vi</sup> MacDonald, George "Creation in Christ" featured in A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants edited by Reuben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck, The Upper Room, c 1983.