

Matthew 16:13-20

Who Do You Say I Am?

I still remember back to when my children were in school, specifically, when my oldest son, Michael, was in high school. Now kids tended to come in and out of our house pretty regularly. One friend of my son's was particularly unabashed. It happened one day that my parents were visiting with us. Ken and I, along with my mom and dad were having a conversation as we relaxed together in the living room. Michael's friend bounded into the house and up the stairs and without so much as a breath looked at my parents and said, "Who are you?!"

Of course we answered his question and he left the room as quickly as he had entered as he went to find Michael somewhere else in the house. My parents, Ken and I looked at each other and laughed. Somehow our young friend felt comfortable enough to question the presence of others in our home, my parents no less.

If you have never been asked the question of "Who are you?" maybe you have asked it or at least thought it about someone else. I have had moments where someone I know well has done something out of character, good or not so good, and thought to myself "Who are you?"

This scripture reading from Matthew asks a central question about identity. But before we get to that let's get ourselves situated. Jesus and the disciples are in the district of Caesarea Philippi. When you read that, one might think, well that's nice, so what? Well, this area was and is of significance to the conversation. This was a place where fertility cults and other gods were worshiped and celebrated. It was a Roman city and to speak of someone having power, other than a Roman Emperor, could prove fatal.

It is here that Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is? It is often easy to speak of what other people are saying, we call it gossip. So those answers come pretty easily to the disciples," Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." (v14) Imagine the scuttlebutt that ensues as they share what others have heard around town and in the countryside.

However, Jesus doesn't leave it there. That was just the set up to the next question, "But who do you say that I am?" Well, if that doesn't stop you in your tracks. Barbara Brown Taylor in her book *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* shares the following that I think is another picture worth pondering as we think about this question. She writes,

It is too bad that the Bible has not come down to us like a musical score with all the pauses written in, or like the script of a play that tells us what happens while

nothing is being said. It would be helpful to have stage directions, something Like: *[Center stage; As soon as Jesus asks the question the disciples all look away, some of them studying the backs of their hands while others move little piles of dirt around with the toes of their sandals.]* Who knows how long that silence lasts before Peter breaks it with his answer? “You are the Christ the son of the living God.”¹

This is how Peter answered the question and he praised and blessed for his answer. Jesus said to him, “...you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (v18,19)

Wow! Just wow! That is quite the promise even if it is difficult to unpack all that it means. In fact, most scholars seem to agree on one thing, no one has a handle on what all of this really means. This talk of loosing and binding is beyond what we have background enough for in order to come to a definitive answer. One a simple note it may be to say that the church has a role in helping people leads lives that transform. But all of that would take another sermon. This day we are focused on the question of identity.

So Simon Peter has answered the question. It has been asked and answered in an uncomfortable place, this place where other deities and rulers appear to have dominion and power. I am not sure that the question would ever be comfortable. What would you say if this morning you stepped outside the church and someone was staring up at the bell tower and asked “So what happens in this building?” You would likely be able to answer that with some very practical stuff, like a worship service, coffee hours, meetings. But what if they asked you, “Who do you worship?” or “Who is this Jesus person anyway?” Going from what to who is a pretty big shift.

How would you answer Jesus’ question of “Who do you say that I am?” It is worth the pondering. I remember one of the first times I was asked about my faith as a young mom. It was one of my close friends who was asking me. I know I didn’t have a very good answer at the time and thought to myself I need to work on that. Yet, here I am years later, with a Master’s of Divinity degree, preaching from this place, and I am still not sure that my answer would satisfy me or anyone else. It would certainly be a different answer than I gave years ago and that would be based in my learning but likely even more so based on my lived experience of God at work in my life, the church, and in the lives of others.

As I have written this message, I have also come to the place of...that’s okay. I don’t need to answer the question perfectly or with some wonderful theological explanation. Even Peter’s answer we are told did not come from himself but was revealed to him by God. (v17) But I think it is important to try to answer that question for ourselves and for

¹ Brown Taylor, Barbara. *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville. 2004. P71.

others. The answer can change and evolve, it doesn't need to be perfectly rehearsed. Sometimes you may even find that God gives you words you hadn't expected. But our faith is more than hearsay or gossip about who Jesus is.

You have come here to this time of worship for a reason. Maybe it is habit, maybe it is out of curiosity, for many of us it is because we believe in Jesus and want to get to know more, to learn more so that we can live out the actions of our lives based in a life of hope, healing, love, and grace that is the desire of God for us. We may not be able to answer the question "Who do you say that I am?" with thoughtful and prepared sentences, but rather we more often find ourselves stumbling over words, knowing in our hearts that this life of faith is valuable and makes of difference and yet not knowing how to express that to others.

Be encouraged to try to answer anyway. Even if you are not asked directly about your faith, experiment with adding sprinkles about your faith into your conversations with others. Next week you will hear of how the rock, Peter, upon whose faith in Jesus stood as a place of firm footing becomes a stumbling block. Peter, a rock of the faith said stuff that he regretted after this shining moment. God still used him.

You are part of this gathering of Christians, this church. Your individual and our collective understanding of who we say Jesus is through our words and actions can speak to others searching for a place to belong, to learn, to love and find community. I often say that one can strive for excellence not perfection. And so in the church let us be encourage to proclaim as Peter did that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, in words and actions that speak to our minds and hearts while striving to reach for a deeper understanding and living that out in faith.

We ask it in the name of Jesus, trusting the deep love of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit working in and among us. Amen.