

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

August 27, 2023

Who do YOU say that I am?

Matthew 16:13-20

13th Sunday After Pentecost/ Lectionary 21

I promise. Nothing about Zelda this time! Though my wife and I are still working our way through that game. 😊

Jesus asks two questions today: "What do people say that the Son of Man is?" And "who do you say that I am?" In other words, who do they say that I am? But who do YOU say that I am?

I wonder what happens if we ask these questions today. Not in 1 century Palestine. But in 2023. Right here in Williamsburg. Because these questions are just as relevant to Jesus' followers today as they were to the disciples following Jesus throughout Galilee. It is a question we must wrestle with as society shifts, and ebbs, and flows all around us.

Who do they say that Jesus is? What do the people outside these doors think about Jesus, about who he is? I'll give you a second... but I'm really asking. I don't think folks around us will say John the Baptist or Elijah – those answers make a ton of sense in Jesus' day, but not so much here. What do people think about Jesus?

About a year ago, The Episcopal Church, USA published the results of their study "Jesus in America." 84% of people in the US believe that Jesus was an important spiritual figure. 76% of Americans believe that Jesus of Nazareth was a real person who existed (that one fascinates me because among religious studies scholars, virtually all count Jesus as a real historical figure – the details of his life, death, resurrection are where the question marks lie). Okay. Good start.

When they asked people if their view of Jesus changed over the last 5-8 years, 27% of millennials answered that their view has changed. And of those, 26% said that it shifted negatively and 65% said it shifted positively. I wonder what they say about Jesus that has shifted negatively.

The poll also asked all respondents to select values and lessons that they believed that Jesus teaches. Of non-religious respondents, only 38% believe that Jesus teaches people to love their neighbors (compared to 70% of mainline protestants). That is actually the highest response in terms of percentage. When asked to answer the question “What, in your opinion, is Jesus’ most important teaching?” 50% of respondents answered “none of the above” or “don’t know.” Together, this tells me that non-religious folks may not really be able to answer a question about who Jesus is. Who do they say that I am? One possible answer is: ☐☐♀ They don’t know.

It seems as though Christians ourselves muddy the waters. When asked to pick characteristics that they associate with Christians, the top answers from not religious respondents were: hypocritical, judgmental, and self-righteous. The lowest answers were: humble, honest, loving. Seeing those numbers was a wake up call for me. Only 17% of non-religious folks think Christians represent the values and teachings of Jesus at all. Christianity as a whole has done a poor job of showing the values and teachings of Jesus.

But of course, the non-religious folks aren’t the only ones outside the walls of this building – though it is a growing group of folks. Who do they say that I am? The Presbyterians. The Baptists. The non-denominationalists. The Catholics. The Muslims. The Jews. The Lutherans all the way over in Norway. Who do they say that Jesus is? It may be similar. It may be different.

Then Jesus turns the tables. Who do YOU say that I am? More accurately, who do y’all say that I am?

Peter dares to speak up with what can be called the first Christian creed – “You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God.” Good answer, Peter. And a brave one. He doesn’t know it, but he’s about to mess it up (that’s for next week, though). Today, Jesus praises him for his faith and his confession.

Lutherans accept and confess three ancient creeds – the Nicene, the Apostles’, and the Athanasian Creed. We’re probably most used to the Nicene and the Apostles’. Those are our wider confessions that the church has accepted as faithful and true. I’m not sure they say much to folks outside the church – and that’s okay.

While I don’t advocate throwing any of those away, I wonder what confessions we hold alongside them. In other words, who do YOU say that Jesus is? Who is Jesus for YOU? What for you makes all of that we confess

each week real in your lives, in your world? What is it about Jesus that speaks to you? What would your confession be if Jesus asked YOU that today? If we can't answer that, well, it is no wonder that the answer from much of the world around us is: I don't know who Jesus is.

The Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney encourages us to name Jesus for ourselves. She writes, "What do you believe? What do you believe about Jesus? What do you believe about the scriptures that tell his story? What do you believe about the God he proclaimed with his life and death and what happened after his death? What do you believe happened after his death? What do you believe? ...What would it look like if you wrote your own creed? I encourage you to do so. Know that it's alright if you find yourself disagreeing with the Creed we say or have questions about something you thought you were sure of before. It's all right if your creed is more questioning than that statement. Your creed need not be long. Your creed can be as short as: I know God is real and I know she loves me, or: Jesus is God's love in human form."¹

Here's a bit of who I say Jesus is. It isn't a complete accounting. But hopefully, it'll help you think about your creed. And help you get to know where I am. You may have similar convictions and confessions. Your confession may add things and remove others:

- Jesus is the God who dared to put on this flesh and these bones – risking all that comes with it in life and death (I've been learning a lot about the risk of these bones of late...) – so that nothing that we experience in this flesh and these bones can be a barrier between us and God. God in this flesh is a pretty big deal.
- This God made Flesh is both fully divine and fully human. And the fully human part gets angry, makes mistakes (see last week), learns, listens, meets people where they are, and has a wicked sense of humor.
- In Jesus, God doesn't stand on the sidelines, in the heavens, but instead reaches down to us and is committed to us.
- In Jesus, I am a named, claimed, beloved child of God. Period.
- Jesus embodies (quite literally) the love of God. Nothing in all creation can separate us from that love.² Not who we are or who we aren't. Not

¹ The Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney, "Confessing Christ and Christian Anti-Semitism," *Womanists Wading in the Word*, April 23, 2017. Accessed on 8/22/2023. <https://www.wilgafney.com/2017/04/23/confessing-christ-and-christian-anti-semitism/>

² Romans 8:38-39

our sexuality, our gender, our socio-economic status, what we do for a living, our mistakes, our hardships nor our successes. Nor anything else in all creation. God's love is a free gift for you. For me. For every single human being on this planet. You can't earn it. You can't lose it. The love of God is yours. And it is mine. And it's theirs too. Grace is real. And it is free.

- Jesus came because of a fundamental reality: this world isn't yet what it should be, what God created it to be. Brokenness and heartache are real. In our communities and in the world. Jesus isn't just about what happens to us when we die, but what happens to us and to others while we all live. Jesus' birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection push us toward God's vision for the world. One where life and love rule. One where the hungry are fed, the poor are housed, the naked are clothed, the foreigners/ strangers are welcomed, the marginalized are moved from the outside into the center.³ Each time those things happen, we get a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven.
- Jesus calls us, the church, to be his body – his hands, his feet, his voice – in the world. We'll always do it imperfectly – there's grace for that. We respond to the love given by sharing it with others.

“Who do you say that I am?” The answer to this question is the foundation upon which the church is built. Yes, we answer this as a community – deciding who we are and what we stand for. But we also do as individuals. [We have no idea what the rest of the disciples would have said or if they agreed with Peter]. When we, like Peter, dare speak a loud our answer to Jesus' question, our collective and individual confessions of who Jesus is form the rock on which the church (both ours and the big “C” church) is built. May Jesus shore up those foundations, empowering the church – all of us as his body in the world – to be a beacon of Jesus' love, hope, and grace. Amen.

³ Matthew 25:31ff