

**Who Do YOU Say I Am?**  
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*Texts: Isaiah 51:1-6, Matthew 16:13-20*

Will you please pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing to you Oh God, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

A couple of years ago now, I decided to stretch outside my comfort zone and go to one of those events where you go alone, and you get grouped up with strangers and you ask them questions about themselves on cards that are provided. It's kind of like small group storytelling with strangers. It either sounds like an extravert's heaven or an introvert's worst nightmare. I consider myself neither, so the jury was out on how I was going to feel about this experience. In any case, it's called Skip the Small Talk and it turned out to be fun. I learned so much about people's lives, about what makes them tick, about what makes them lay awake at night. As someone who loves to listen to people's stories I was glad I tried something new. At the end of the evening I was talking to a group of people after the event had closed and the inevitable question came up, "So, what do you do for work?" I replied that I was going to school to become a minister and that I work at a church in Cambridge. Immediately there was the familiar awkward silence of people I barely know trying to figure out what a millennial is doing associating herself with institutional religion professionally. Then, one of the young men in the group who had previously noted that he worked in sales at Gillette turned to me and asked, "Oh, so do you consider Jesus Christ your personal Lord and savior?"

He spoke in a tone that I couldn't help but notice was a little less genuine and a little more aggressive than I would have liked. That's not usually a question we get asked here in New England, so I took a moment to try to figure out how to even begin to respond. To be honest I just wanted to stop talking about this and get out of the conversation as soon as possible like I've done so many times before, but I knew that was not the best way to handle this interaction no matter how annoyed I was with that reality. I started out with saying, "You know, that's a really loaded phrase and I'd be happy to explain who Jesus is to me if you are interested and have some time." He did, in fact end up having some time, and in the course of the conversation we discovered we had a lot of shared convictions about social justice and about self-compassion, all of which I would consider as a part of the gospel. A conversation I was dreading turned out to be definitely incomplete and imperfect but also a place where both of us found common ground despite our differences. No conversation about Jesus is ever complete or simple, and even some don't happen at all because we don't want to sit with that dreaded discomfort of complexity and unfinished-ness.

This moment of wrestling with how to explain who Jesus is to me came rushing back to my mind as I read the gospel text for this morning. Jesus asks Peter a similarly direct question about his own identity, although I would like to think it was asked with genuine curiosity and some compassion for his disciple trying to figure out the world around him in a time of social upheaval. After inquiring about what everyone else is saying about Jesus, Jesus asks the disciples, "But what about you?" "Who do you say I am?" Jesus doesn't ask them directly "Who am I, in an objective sense?" He doesn't ask "So what have I done that's good or bad for Galilee?" No. He makes it personal, he points out that the thing that matters about his question is the relationship between him and Peter. He asks who do YOU say I am?

This question is just as important now as it was then, and it is just as personal. The effect of reading this passage and encountering this question is nothing short of arresting and disarming. There is something shocking about these words, something that stops us in our tracks and makes us pay

attention. Why do these words hit us so heavily? Why is it so hard for us to talk about Jesus? Perhaps because the usual words that we use in church are so confusing and foreign compared to how we talk about other things: Son of Man, what the heck is that? Messiah, Christ, Son of God and also God? But also, fully human? It's enough to make one's head spin. These are the words that maybe don't necessarily feel like they fit in our everyday lives or we use these words in church and perhaps we don't quite fully understand them. In his answer to Jesus Peter joins us in using words he doesn't quite fully understand. Jesus asks, "who do you say I am?" And Peter, as the spokesperson for the disciples, replies, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," not yet fully understanding what that will mean for him and for the world. Jesus himself acknowledges that Peter does not get this answer from logic, from observed behavior or from some book. He receives it from God as revelation, as a gift of divine wisdom.

You see, the word "Messiah" or in the Greek "Christ" means "Anointed One" or the one that is blessed by God to carry out God's will in the world. Up until this point, in a political landscape that is dominated by oppression and violence this "anointed one" was expected to come out swords ablazing, leading the charge against tyranny to liberate God's people from empire. Peter expects superhero Jesus, someone to solve all their problems and intervene. What he gets instead is someone who is a revolutionary, yes, but not in the way he could predict. Jesus doesn't fix Peter's problems, but he shows Peter ultimately who he is and whose he is by prompting him to continue to engage with this question of identity.

Perhaps the reason why it's so hard to talk about who Jesus is to us is because it is revealing something deep about ourselves. What we choose to say about Jesus tells the world who we are. An even more difficult question is who do we say Jesus is in the midst of a global pandemic, when we face the existential dread and imminent reality of climate change, when the doctor tells us news we feel we can't handle, when our democracy and sense of human decency seem to be any day now flying out the window? This exchange between Peter and Jesus happens in the region of Caesarea Philippi, which one commentary identifies as a borderland. The commentary also notes that "By the time the Gospel of Matthew was written, people were likely aware that the Roman commander who led the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE had returned with his troops to Caesarea Philippi in celebration of their victory." This exchange happens in a place of heart wrenching defeat, a place that represents not only transition, but is a monument to what Jesus' people have lost to the violence of empire. And yet, even in the midst of all of that, Peter claims Jesus as the Messiah. Who is Jesus to us in these moments of wilderness? Who will we look to in these moments when we stand at the threshold of monuments to what we have lost?

These are foundational questions and if we continue to wrestle with them we are doing the work of the church. Together with God's help by living with these questions we are laying a foundation of love that will guide us through times of uncertainty. Maybe during this time Jesus being the Messiah, the Son of the living God, looks like you holding onto kindness and softness for yourself when you just can't do everything you used to be able to do, maybe it looks like when you feel like you are at the end of the rope you find it within yourself to have hope for a better tomorrow, or maybe it looks like being open to making space for people who are different from you even though everything around you is changing.

Jesus invites us into lives that inspire us not to be satisfied with simple answers and faith journey's where we have the satisfaction of being A plus students. Jesus doesn't require this of us. We know this because in the next portion of this text Peter goes on to get it wrong, again, and yet Jesus chooses him to represent his church in our passage for today. The gospel isn't that Jesus comes into our lives and makes it all better, Jesus comes into our lives and helps us discover the love already written into the foundations of our being, reveals grace so real and so strong that it has the power to set us free time and time again and that this love and grace in the world that Jesus reveals to us is something that we are

willing to commit our lives to. Jan Richardson's Blessing for the Brokenhearted reflects back to me what Jesus can be to us in this time. She says,

*“Let us agree  
for now  
that we will not say  
the breaking  
makes us stronger  
or that it is better  
to have this pain  
than to have done  
without this love.*

*Let us promise  
we will not  
tell ourselves  
time will heal  
the wound,  
when everyday  
our waking  
opens it anew.*

*Perhaps for now  
it can be enough  
to simply marvel  
at the mystery  
of how a heart  
so broken  
can go on beating,  
as if it were made  
for precisely this—*

*as if it knows  
the only cure for love  
is more of it,*

*as if it sees  
the heart's sole remedy  
for breaking  
is to love still,*

*as if it trusts  
that its own  
persistent pulse  
is the rhythm  
of a blessing  
we cannot  
begin to fathom  
but will save us  
nonetheless.*

This is the inheritance upon which we stand, this love, a blessing we cannot begin to fathom but will save us nonetheless. Our engagement with this question about Jesus helps us realize that as Christians we will always be living with this question and the answers will be different as we grow and change. As we come to terms with the fact that this is a kind of question that can't be pushed into a box or figured out and stored away, Jesus is building the church on imperfect people like us, people who continue to wrestle with our faith, and are sometimes, so very tired. And yet, continue to listen to that persistent pulse, knowing that the living God is present within our hearts and in our world.

Amen