

“Who Is He? Who Am I?”

Today’s Gospel asks two questions that resonate across the centuries. The first is the question Jesus asks of the disciples “Who do you say that I am?” The other question is, “Given my answer to the first question, who am I?”

First let’s consider what you feel about Jesus in your heart of hearts. I am not asking that you make a confession here and now, but to ponder who you think Jesus is. Jesus is very smart in the way he asks the disciples this question. He initially asks them who others say that he is. This frees them to say what they have heard on the street. It also frees them to say what they think by attributing it to someone else. This is a technique that public opinion researchers use to elicit feelings perceived as socially unacceptable from interviewees; ones they would be otherwise be unwilling to admit. The interviewee gets to express the negative feelings without taking ownership of them. What The Gospel of Mark records are not negative statements, but what we consider statements that are off the mark. Statements such as: John the Baptist, Elijah, and one of the prophets. It is plausible that some of the disciples reported some negative statements, after all the religious officials have been hounding and testing Jesus for some time.

Jesus goes on to ask the salient question. “Who do you say that I am?” Remember that the disciples in the Gospel of Mark are portrayed as thick headed. They are the “duh-sciples.” So having put out there what “others” have said about Jesus, they seem unwilling to say what they think. Either they are embarrassed or they are truly confused. It does beg the question why they are following Jesus, if they have no idea who he is. Do we humans just follow a leader when we do not have any idea who they are or what they stand for? These are not the fringe of the Jesus movement who might just be hanging on for the excitement or to be part of something. These are the closest of his followers and they are unable or unwilling to say who they think Jesus is. Only then does Peter blurt out “You are the Messiah.”

If you were asked this question today what would you say? Perhaps you would agree with Peter. Other things I have heard Christians call Jesus are: teacher, Shaman, wise man, spiritually connected, healer, preacher, friend, and buddy are just a few. Notice that these people who are Christians use labels that are not messianic or in some cases religious as their ultimate label for Jesus. That may be just fine. Perhaps that is where they are in their spiritual journey. Perhaps that is where the disciples except for Peter were in their understanding of Jesus. Our journeys have different trajectories. Being close to Jesus as they were may have made it hard for the disciples to figure it out in that moment.

Perhaps the more profound question is not “Who do you say that I am?” but rather, “Who do you tell other people that I am?” Imagine that you walk out of this service today and a stranger approaches you on the street. This stranger is in no way threatening just curious when they say, “I noticed you coming out of that church. I have never been to church and I was just wondering why you go to church? Perhaps more to my point tell me about this person Jesus what does he mean to you?” Do you feel a little clenching in your chest? Do you feel a desire to avoid the interaction? Do you want to answer, “Go ask the minister, he will tell you?” Or could you say something from your heart that might help the stranger. Perhaps you would invite the stranger for a cup of coffee because the answer is not simple. Perhaps you would

mumble something from the creed and move on before it got any more uncomfortable. Could it be we are more than tongue-tied or feel you lack the proper theological words to answer the question? Could it be that we are afraid of the next question, which could be, “How is your life different because of Jesus?”

As important as our answer to the question of who Jesus is, how we live in response to that understanding is crucial. Suppose you have not been able to shake off your interlocutor and this question arises. You cannot send the stranger to the minister on this one, if you do not just turn and flee now might be the time to suggest a cup of coffee. At least getting to Common Grounds will give you some time to think about your answer. Perhaps in that walk you will realize that Jesus gave you the answer in today’s Gospel lesson. “I have denied myself and followed Jesus.”

Being as materialistic as we are we may fret that to deny one’s self means we have to live an ascetic life, that is a life without luxuries or even needs being met. That is not the case. In his letter to the Galatians St. Paul wrote, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”¹ Or as my late friend Lamar Williamson wrote, “The significance of the text lies in the paradoxes. I learn who I am by discovering who Jesus is. The way to self-fulfillment is the way of self-denial.”²

It is not that we give up stuff, but rather that we give up our ego. We give up the part of ourselves that still thinks we are the center of the universe. That childlike understanding that the world revolves around us does not go away. We have to recognize it and stop indulging it. That is what Jesus calls us to when he says “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” If we are to be Jesus followers and not merely Jesus believers we have to put aside our lives for the sake of what Jesus teaches and lives for. Such a life might be lived by committing to raising children in need, or caring for an ill parent, or fighting inhumane laws or policies. These are not dalliances where we go back to our comfortable lives when our shift is over. These are lives devoted to others. Just as Jesus lay down his life for others, just as first responders on 9/11 laid down their lives for others, just as saints like Teresa, Bonhoeffer, and King laid down their lives for others.

We are each to ask the question “Who is Jesus?” and then another question “Who am I” in light of who I think Jesus is. We have choices. But if we are truly followers of Jesus the one valid choice is to listen to Jesus’ teachings, learn from his life, and most importantly understand that obedience of the will of God is the ground zero of his life. We can know God’s will for us by study of scripture, prayer, and careful attention to God’s movement in our lives. It means that we stop indulging every whim and start indulging God. Then slowly, perhaps so slowly we do not even notice it, our ego gives way and lets Jesus in. As that happens our lives become rich beyond measure and we find our true life our true home.

¹ Galatians 2:20 NRSV

² Lamar Williamson, *Mark: Interpretation for Preaching and Teaching* [Louisville: John Knox, 1983] p156.