

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

August 23, 2020 (Proper 16, Year A)
Matthew 16:13-20

Our gospel reading today asks a fundamental question: "Who do you say that I am?"

In the world that we live in today, in the masses, with so many CONFLICTING beliefs, in the face of the FALSE gods of power and influence, Jesus asks, "Who do YOU say that I am?"

I suggest to you this morning that that is the most essential, the most urgent, the most relevant question that Jesus could ask. Wherever we turn in life, whatever we do, whatever decision we have to make, we are faced again and again with the IMPLICATIONS of THIS question: "Who do YOU say that I am?"

Over the ages, COUNTLESS people have attempted to ANSWER that question for everyone. Ernest Renan, a French writer, answered it by saying that Jesus was a sentimental idealist. Bruce Barton, an American businessman, said that Jesus was the greatest salesman who ever lived. William Hirsch, a Jewish writer, responded that Jesus conformed to the clinical picture of paranoia. A musical said that Jesus was a Superstar. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, referred to Jesus as the "man for others."

One pastor remembered his Systematic Theology professor in seminary describe Jesus as "the proleptic, salvific, hidden appearance of the eschatological kingdom of God."

I saw a meme on Facebook that made fun of those kinds of descriptions. It says,

And Jesus said unto the theologians, "Who do you say that I am?"

They replied, "You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being, the kerygma of which we find the ultimate meaning in our interpersonal relationships."

And Jesus said, "What?"

And so, the question to the disciples comes AGAIN: "Who do YOU say that I am?" And YOU, disciple, must answer it. And you. And you. And you. You must answer it for yourself. I don't expect you to say anything like "proleptic" or "salvific" or "eschatological." No, my prayer is that, WITH Simon Peter, you would say, with every FIBER of your being, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Now, Jesus' FIRST question was a question of knowledge, IMPERSONAL: "Who do PEOPLE say that the Son of Man is?" But with this SECOND question, Jesus gets PERSONAL. "Who do YOU say that I am?"

Luther wrote: "I care not whether he be Christ, but that he be Christ for YOU."

I'll say that again: "I care not whether he be Christ, but that he be Christ for you." "FOR YOU." As in "the body of Christ given FOR you," and "the blood of Christ shed FOR you." Everything Jesus was and did and said was for the life of the world, and that includes EACH of YOU.

Jesus was born, for you.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate, for you.

He was crucified, died, and was buried, for you.

He descended into hell, for you.

On the third day he rose again, for you.

He ascended into heaven, for you.

He is seated at the right hand of the Father, not for HIMSELF, but for you.

And He will come again, for you.

When we confess those words from the Apostles' Creed, they're more than just words, more than mere knowledge—it's a statement of FAITH, it's what we BELIEVE, it MEANS something.

MOST of us live our day to day LIVES like our faith means NOTHING to us, like Jesus is nobody – except maybe on Sunday. But Christianity isn't a set of ideas or ideals that we can use one day and put away for the rest of the week; our faith is a PERSON, it's a way of LIFE, a way of walking WITH Jesus. It's a RELATIONSHIP. We love God because God first loved us, in Christ.

And that relationship is what gets us through the day. It's what gives us HOPE when we don't know what to do, when our world is crashing down around us, or when people we love are dying. It's what MAKES life worth LIVING.

Jesus said, "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." Most scholars agree that the phrase "the gates of Hades" is poetic language for the power of DEATH. "The gates of hell, the power of DEATH, SHALL NOT PREVAIL against the church!"

Dr. W. A. Criswell, Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, said on one occasion, on an airplane flight, he found himself seated beside a well-known theologian. He desperately wanted to start a conversation and they got to talking.

The man told Dr. Criswell about how he had recently lost his little boy. Dr. Criswell listened as he told his story: He said that he'd come home from school with a fever and they thought it was just one of those childhood things, but it was a very virulent form of meningitis. The doctor said they couldn't save his little boy. He would die.

And so, this seminary professor, loving his son as he did, sat by the bed-side to watch this death vigil. It was the middle of the day, but the little boy, whose strength was going from him, and whose vision and brain were getting clouded, said, "Daddy, it's getting dark isn't it?" The professor said to his son, "Yes son, it's getting dark, very dark." Of course, it WAS very dark for him. He said, "Daddy, I guess it's time for me to go to sleep, isn't it?"

He said, "Yes, son, it's time for you to go to sleep."

The professor said the little fellow had a way of fixing his pillow just so, and putting his head on his hands when he slept, and he fixed his pillow like that and laid his head on his hands and said, "Good night Daddy. I'll see you in the morning." He then closed his eyes and stepped over into heaven.

Dr. Criswell said the professor didn't say ANY more after that. He just looked out the window of that airplane for a long time. Then he turned back and he looked at Dr. Criswell with the tears streaming down his face, and he said, "Dr. Criswell, I can hardly wait till the morning."

You see, the morning is COMING. And we will see our loved ones again. That's what Jesus is saying, "The gates of hell, the power of DEATH, shall NOT prevail against the church!"

That faith is a gift from God. It doesn't COME from us. We couldn't ENDURE such a loss on our own. THAT kind of faith comes from GOD. Faith BEGINS with God. It couldn't come from us any more than PETER'S confession could have come from HIM – good old say the wrong thing, get thee behind me Satan, deny me three times, Peter.

It's ALL GOD. God INSPIRED Peter to say, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." And that confession, that relationship, that FAITH is the rock the church was built on. It's the ONE thing that makes a person a Christian. Jesus Christ IS Christianity. Our faith isn't a set of IDEAS; it's a PERSON.

How important is that? Just ask that grieving father – it means EVERYTHING.

Luther hit the nail right on the head. "I care not whether he be Christ, but that he be Christ for YOU."

Who IS Jesus for you? Who do YOU say that he is?

Me? "I can hardly wait till the morning." Amen.