

A Sermon by Nada Sellers, preached at First Congregational Church, Branford CT on 3-13-16

"Identity"

Exodus3:13-15 & Mark 8:27-30

It's the sort of thing those of us who are parents or who are close to the daily care and keeping of children, will recognize right away... Of all the many, many moments of wonder and blessing we experience with our children, there's nothing like the questions they so often come up with. For me, I've noticed that it's often the simple questions that are the most challenging, you know, the ones that are clear, straight-forward, shine-the-spot-light-on-me, types of questions with very little room for ambiguity or adult maneuvering. One of my favorites is one word long: "Why?" Yes, "why?" If you have ever engaged in the never-ending drama of the "why?" question with a child, you know exactly what I mean. From clear-eyed wonder, and the sheer joy of fact-finding and sucking up gobs and gobs of new information, to the ragged exercise of mining deeper and deeper to keep offering replies that satisfy this insatiable desire to KNOW something as deeply as possible, answering the "Why?" questions of a small person can be a really difficult experience!:

"Why do I have to eat my peas?"

So you'll be big and strong and healthy.

"But why?"

Because peas are yummy and good for you!

"But why?"

Because as peas grow in the soil they make food for us, and give our bodies what they need to grow and stay strong.

"Why?"

I guess because God made sure peas give us lots of important stuff to build up our insides!

"And why?"

Because God loves us and hopes we will do what our Mom wants us to do which is... eat your peas! No more why's now, please finish!

There are gobs and gobs of examples of questions within our bibles, and as we starting exploring two weeks ago, the questions Jesus asked, as recorded in our sacred texts, provide us with the chance to engage in a search for meanings which enrich our faith. This morning's question goes like this... *READ MARK 8:27-30.*

"Who do people say that I am?" Our passage presents the first verses of the geographical and theological climax at the mid-point of the book of Mark. Jesus' public ministry in Galilee is basically completed; from here on out, all of the action is directed toward Jerusalem. Here the question of Jesus' identity is answered by Peter and immediately the focus pivots to what it means for Jesus to be Christ (v. 31), and therefore, for his followers to be Christians (v. 34). These are themes that dominate the remainder of the Gospel, providing an opening passage in which the writer of Mark is able to describe how the way of Jesus is also the way of the Christian: Being a follower is at the heart of the matter. (*Matthew* in Interpretation series, Williamson JKP, 1983:150-151, intro, 4-5)

First, Part A of Jesus' question: "Who do people say that I am?" offers the chance for some objective reflection. Taking time to step away from the ministry, and to look back over what's been taking place, Jesus asks what others think of him. There's been a lot of speculation about who Jesus is and isn't. There is a record of public acts and signs, things like appointing disciples, the preaching of parables, the calming of storms, and healings of all sorts of illnesses, including those influenced by demonic possessions. John the Baptist has been killed, Peter walks on the water, non-Jews are being drawn to Jesus, and many thousands of people have been fed physically, and spiritually and emotionally. Jesus wants to know, "what's the word on the street?" It's not surprising that the disciples respond by identifying figures found in Jewish tradition: Elijah, or Jeremiah or one of the other prophets. For many generations, Jewish teachings have pointed to these people as the ones who will come before the Messiah, preparing the way of the Lord, making straight the highway in the desert for our God. (Is. 40) Some of you may be familiar with the various ways in which Elijah is associated with Passover meal; how an extra cup of wine is poured, and perhaps a place at the table with an empty chair is set, and for some, how the door of an observant home is opened and the prophet is invited in. All of these are ways of remembering the prophet's role of heralding the Messiah for whom Jewish people still wait, and of emphasizing some of his other important roles in the tradition. So perhaps Jesus is actually the prophet, come to usher in the One who is to come? (Various sources, including chabad.org and judicaworld.com.wordpress.com; See Malachi 4:5-6)

Jesus, not to be deterred from his purposes of mining for identification, poses the question in a much more personal way: Part B of his question is, "Who do YOU say that I am?" The silence must have been deafening... Why is that question so difficult to answer? These disciples had been the road with Jesus for a lot of miles, watching him preach and teach and heal and restore. Deep within their hearts, hadn't they had the chance to come to an honest and bold answer? And yet how is one to give voice to something so profoundly important? To answer correctly means everything must change, while to mess this one up is ultimate humiliation. Of course, there have been so many, many different answers to who Jesus is or was. Was he - as the Romans came to view him - a "false claimant to the office of King of the Jews" or just "another traveling miracle worker and professional exorcist roaming through Galilee performing tricks." (R. Aslan *Zealot* Random House, 2013:102) Is Jesus as Dietrich Bonhoeffer said "the man for others," or the great liberator as he is viewed by many Latin American theologians? Is he the primary teacher of our normative Christian social ethic? (J. H. Yoder *The Politics of Jesus*) Perhaps he is the "crucified God" of the influential theologian Jurgen Moltmann? (M. Copenhaver, *Jesus is the Question* pp.101-102)

One can only imagine what may have been running around in the disciples' heads as they heard Jesus probing for their thoughts. Never one to be shy, Peter cracks the silence with a reply. "Who do you say that I am?" Answer: "You are the Christ, the Messiah." Christ, as the Greek form of the Hebrew title "Messiah," literally means, "the anointed one." In Mark, "Christ" refers to God's anointed king, and in particular, to the messianic figure whom Jews expected to restore the throne of David and to consummate the age they've all been waiting for in God's promises. (*Mark*, L. Williamson, Interp. series WJK, 2009:10) Jesus is the one, and God is working in and through him at this point in history! But hush, don't tell anybody! Not yet anyway... Up until this point in the story of Mark, the Pharisees and the disciples alike have been blind to the

meaning of Jesus' mighty acts and teachings. The last word from Jesus to the disciples in the earlier verses of chapter 8, as his Galilean ministry comes to a close is, "Do you still not perceive or understand?... Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?... Do you not yet understand?" (vv17ff) This is a mixed up, confused group who still can't figure out who Jesus is...

Peter is somehow able to get it right – Jesus is the anointed one, sent from God to establish God's reign, something that will not involve armies and weapons on the battlefield, with great political conquest and the removal of oppressive occupiers as most had anticipated. What that meant for the first disciples, and then the early church as it wrestled with the fact that Jesus had gone and not returned as they'd expected, is explored more deeply in John's gospel and the letters to the churches. What it means to you and me today as those traveling along this same path of discipleship is something we are each called to articulate and to express. "Who do you say that I am?" There's no fence-sitting on this one – no escapes into the comforts of objectivity or "facts." This is a heart and mind issue – it involves the allegiance and purposes of our lives. We might choose to pursue this as C. S. Lewis did, narrowing things down to but two options:

[Some will say really foolish things about Jesus,] such as 'I'm ready to accept Jesus a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.' That is the sort of thing we must not say. A man who is merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit on him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God." (as cited by M. Copenhaver, pp102-103)

"Who do you say that I am?" You are the Son of God, or a madman...

Another perspective that I tend to find personally helpful in trying to answer Jesus' question, is articulated by Rob Bell, the internationally known Christian author, teacher and speaker:

Jesus is how I understand God. I realize that for some people, hearing talk about Jesus shrinks and narrows the discussion about God, but my experience has been the exact opposite. My experiences of Jesus have opened my mind and my heart to a bigger, wider, more expansive and mysterious and loving God who I believe is actually up to something in the world. (*What We Talk About When We Talk About God*, HarperOne, 2013:14)

"Who do you say that I am?" You are the one who helps me understand God, who opens my mind and heart to God.

And sharing a portion of a final sermon shared he as he departed from his congregation of nine years, Martin Copenhaver writes,

I want to tell you what Jesus means to me. I want to share my belief that everything depends on him. I want to assure you that you can lean on him in times of trouble. I want to ask you to listen to his words of challenge. I want to tell you that I believe you can entrust your life to him... he is Lord of this church, and in his name you are freed to love one another and empowered to share that love with a hurting world. I want to profess that, though once

people could not look at the face of God and live, now we are invited to look at the face of God...in Jesus, and live as we have never lived before. He is Emmanuel, God with us, God with us all, whether we are together or apart...
(*Question*, p. 108)

"Who do you say that I am?" You are the face of God, life-giving, the one on whom everything depends, our source of strength in times of trouble, trustworthy, God with us.

Let this be an important question in your own journey through Lent and beyond, to focus on this seemingly simple question: "Who do you say that I am?" What are the things you and I need to learn or to share which might help us clarify who Jesus is and why this matters in our lives? How might this help us surface new understandings of the nature of the church and the mandates we have to be disciples, as well as to help form disciples within and beyond the church? In response to this simple question, may we be able to say, 'Jesus, you are the Christ, the Son of God.' Amen.

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