

*Who do you say that I am?*

First Congregational Branford

9-16-17/Mark 8:27-30

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Okay, to set the scene for today's scripture, Jesus had already performed some miracles, walked on water, and healed folks. You also need to know that in chapter 6 we'd learned that King Herod, and those who'd heard of Jesus, thought that Jesus was John the Baptist returned.

Okay, here we go:

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Let us pray....

It was fun to hear some answers from a few of you to my question in Thursday's eSpire article, "why do you attend church." I'd shown a graph from a national survey that showed the reasons why American adults attend church. The top reason was....drumroll..... *to become closer to God*. Not surprisingly, that was the top reason members gave in our Life Among the Believers small group gatherings in the spring. On Friday, one person shared this answer, borrowed from popular theologian Tony Robinson: *Personally, I go to church, at least in part, to get a break from myself... to get a break from human beings. I go to remember God. I go to be reminded that I live always before and unto a gracious God. That is the precious reminder I most need.*

mmm mmm mmm, Wonderful! We come to remember that human beings aren't the masters of the universe. And, to remember that God is with us, hovering, *guiding our feet*, suggesting the wisest course for us at any given moment - when we listen...

So, here on our Homecoming Sunday, we're back to not only remember *God*, but in our life among the believers this year, let's set an even firmer foundation regarding Jesus, one that will bolster, inspire, *and* empower us. We'll talk about who he can be for us, who he can be for our church, who we can trust him to be in our life - *to guide our feet, hold our hand, and to stand by us.*(references *Guide Our Feet* choral anthem today)

Let's take a look at the biblical setting where Jesus asked today's important question, *who do you say that I am*. He asked it in a really awkward place! He didn't ask it in a place more conducive to spiritual reflection, like beside the Sea of Galilee... Ah... *Let me tell you who you are to me, sweet Jesus - how do I love thee, let me count the ways*. No!, he took the twelve up to Caesarea Philippi, a place named *Philip is Caesar* - named for the Roman, Herod Philip. It had also once been a place called *Pantown*, in honor of the Greek God, Pan, before the Romans invaded. For all we know, Jesus may have popped the question right where many of the Greek god statues had been! In what would've been considered an unholy place to a good Jew, Jesus asked the question. Wow, pretty smart, our Jesus... Think how many competing images there were right there - a Roman king, numerous gods. So, first, Jesus asks, *who do people say that I am*, and they said John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets. But, watch this now, he zeroes in, looks them in the eye... *But who do you say that I am...* my beloved, those closest to me, who I've shared the keys to the kingdom... after everything, who do you say that I am?

When Peter answers, it is the first correct statement about Jesus' identity in the Gospel. *You are the Messiah* - which means the anointed one, the one sent by God, the one that people have been waiting for. Jesus then orders them not to tell! The authorities were already on his tail for blasphemy. The last thing he needed was to be named the Messiah! Of course, this could have been reverse psychology - let's face it, the best way to spread news is to tell someone not to spread it! Right? Who knows? Oh, that Jesus!

So, Jesus asked the question in an awkward place. When and where does Jesus ask you, *who do you say that I am*? He probably doesn't ask it while you're sitting in church, or when you're sitting at a campfire at church camp beside the lake under the stars. That's too easy. When and where might he ask the question?

I came up with a few examples... Maybe when people are lifting up the greatness of celebrities, or the greatness of politicians.... who do you say that I am? Maybe when people are gossiping, maybe when you're tempted to cheat in some way... Maybe when someone talks smack about Jesus he comes along and pops the question, *but who do you say that I am? You just heard who they say that I am. Who do you say that I am?* Or, maybe when your child puts up resistance and doubt about Jesus, Jesus asks *who do you say that I am* to your child? *What can you say to your child to let them know who I really am? Who do you say that I am?*

Jesus asked me the question last Saturday night during a wedding reception following a wedding that my husband had officiated. All of the guests were enjoying an evening under the stars, on the dock of the Connecticut River Museum, next to the Connecticut River - a very secular place. Oh, these wedding

destinations! The wedding couple were atheists, even though the bride had been in Ken's confirmation class many years ago! The couple asked Ken to remove all language about God and Christ in the ceremony. He was willing to do that for them. The truth is... people loved it! Even believers. You know why? One of Ken's church members, who has barely stepped foot into First Congregational Essex in our 14 years there, talked with the two of us about the service. She said the things Ken said were more accessible, more pertinent to peoples' lives. He got them where they were in their day to day.

Ken and I talk a lot about this - about whether Christians need to bend to the culture, especially in a time when frankly, people just aren't interested in Jesus and church. Look around you. *Or*, is it that they're not interested in who *other people* have said Jesus is - that he's a hard and rigid taskmaster, *you'd better mind your ps and qs or you're going to hell*. You'd better be good in order to receive his love and forgiveness. You need to be good!

It's a shame, 'cause I didn't get into this for *that* Jesus.

I'd be on the dock with them!

But, the Jesus who came to me changed my life, by loving me just as I am. And, I wanted more of that.

I think about what Jesus *did to draw people in*. Jesus was smart, and he was crafty! - he knew people wanted something different. Here's the ploy he often used to catch a fish - he told stories and jokes and parables - he didn't recite a bunch of scripture. You know what that did? It opened a wider door. He went to the non-religious. That's why religious people were so mad! They wanted the rules adhered to. Jesus was trying to get more people in, but they wanted them out!

...And, that's why there were so many people standing on the dock that night without a church... Other people, the church, have told them that Jesus is a rule maker. *He is who we say he is!*

But, who do *you* say Jesus is?

When Jesus asked me the question on the dock, I thought [I could witness, I could try to change her mind and proceed to tell her who I think Jesus is, but instead, Ken and I just listened. When Jesus asked me the question, I felt my heart open and relax toward this woman, and so I didn't need to prove anything. Two ministers listened *to her* that night.] We need this woman telling us the truth, we need all of these people. *They're good people*. She told us: we need meaning in our lives, we need to know this isn't all there is, this beautiful dock with all of these boats we can afford. We need help. But, we can't go back into the church as it is.

Can we make room for them? I know there are those who want and appreciate the traditional understanding of Jesus. But, how might we be a little

crafty and get other people in here, too? Have two services - one for us, and one for *them*? Is separating from one another the answer? While we could hold a different kind of service on another day, *for them*, I just wonder about a worship service where all can get to know who Jesus really is. You know, this one: *Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so*. Might Jesus want us to let go a little of what we think church “should be” in order to make room for what “could be”?

Who do you say Jesus is? Here in this time and place at FCCB in 2018, who might Jesus be to us today?

Remember the song, *What if God was one of us? Just a stranger on the bus trying to make his way home*. That song puts Jesus right here in our midst instead of just 2,000 years ago in a time and place we can barely understand. Maybe he’s just a stranger on the bus trying to make his way home.

But, who do you say that Jesus is?....

(I wrote on an easel with newsprint the name *Jesus*, then the answers that were given all around him:

from 8:00am worship: Son of God, Christ, Teacher, Love, Redeemer, Leader, Friend, Pain-Bearer, Man, Servant, Healer, Word, Brother, Light

from 10:00 worship: Redeemer, Savior, Unconditional Lover, Friend, Healer, Communicator, Storyteller, Inspirer, Watcher, Brother, Guide, Hugger, Rule-breaker

(then I showed a sheet that I had done: healer, friend, inviter, forgiver, lover, peace-maker, unifier, justice bringer, joy giver, tear dryer, teacher, second chance, glory maker, chain breaker, freedom maker, redeemer, Son of God, Light of the World.

Jesus. There really is something about that name. Amen.

Sing hymn, *There’s Something About that Name*