

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

MATTHEW 16:13-20
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
BY: RYAN DUECK
AUGUST 24, 2014/11TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

For the past two thousand years, people have been asking and offering a wide variety of answers to the question Jesus asks in our passage this morning—the question on the front of your bulletins: “Who do you say that I am?”

The first Christians’ proclaimed, “Jesus is Lord” and for a large part of Western history that was assumed to be the case (even if not always very well understood).

But over the last few hundred years, Jesus has become a rather flexible figure! Jesus has been described as everything from a gentle peacenik hippy-type, to a wandering philosopher, to a political revolutionary, to someone who was deeply confused—possibly even mentally ill—and had a Messiah complex, to a twenty-first century American evangelist to any number of other conceptions.

Everyone has their ideas about who Jesus is.

There are no shortages of opinions in our culture about who Jesus was and why he mattered (if, indeed, he did matter at all). The “real Jesus” isn’t always easy to find.

There are lots of different understandings of Jesus, some good, some not so good; some accurate, some more imaginative ☺.

How do we find the “real Jesus” amidst all the competing and sometimes contradictory voices we hear?

Well, our text this morning also deals with a question of who, exactly, the real Jesus is.

Peter’s declaration, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” has echoed down through the ages.

But the word “Messiah” is one of those words that we may be *too* familiar with. We know it relates to Jesus somehow, we may know that it is a term that comes out of Israel’s history, but it’s a strange word for us.

We know what the words “president” or “prime minister” or even “rabbi” and “priest” mean, but “Messiah?” That we’re not so sure about.

A bit of background: The setting of this conversation is important. It says that Jesus asks his disciples about who they say he is in Caesarea Philippi. This was way north of Jerusalem, way north even of Galilee (1.5 hours by car today in the Golan Heights). It seems like an odd place to go for a lesson on Jesus’ identity.

Caesarea Philippi was a hotbed of religious experimentation—everything from paganism to various Greek religions. It was also home to a prominent temple devoted to the newest pagan God—the Roman Emperor himself!

And in *this* context, Peter confesses Jesus as the “Messiah.” What would this word have meant in this context?

It didn’t mean “divine being” or “second person of the Trinity.” Jesus would be revealed as these things later on, but not at this point in the story.

At this point in the story, the word “Messiah” was a *political* title.

For Jewish readers and listeners, the word “Messiah” would have meant someone who would liberate Israel from the Roman Empire, who would restore political autonomy to Israel, and kick in the reign of peace and worship of God.

Messiahs had to do at least three things:

1. Rebuild/cleanse the temple
2. Defeat the enemy that was threatening God’s people
3. Bring God’s justice to bear—in Israel and throughout the world

This is what people expected from their Messiahs. This is likely what Peter had in mind when he made his declaration that Jesus is the Messiah.

And Jesus doesn't correct him. In fact, he very publicly affirms Peter's statement. Jesus identifies himself as the Messiah. Right there in the city where an image of the Roman Emperor was worshiped.

This is exciting stuff. You can almost sense the disciples' enthusiasm. *Finally*, things are going to turn around for them and their people. The Messiah is going to put people in their place and make things right!

But what happens when we read on in Matthew 16?

21 From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

22 Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"

23 Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

24 Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. **25** For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. **26** What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

All of a sudden Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah seems on shaky ground! What's all this stuff about suffering?!

Messiahs don't do that! That's not part of the job description! That's not what we're waiting for!

Peter rebukes Jesus and Jesus has strong words for him in return: "Get behind me Satan! You do not have the concerns of God in mind."

Peter goes from hero to zero pretty quickly here. He shows that even though he understood *some* things about who Jesus was, there was a *lot* that he didn't know.

He had his own concerns in mind—human concerns, concerns about his nation, possibly about revenge, about political action—not God’s.

Jesus accepts Peter’s initial (correct) statement of his identity but then begins to redefine it.

It’s almost as if Jesus says, “Yes, I am the Messiah. Now let me show you what that means.

It means that I will suffer and die for the sake of my people.

It means that the way that God redeems and reclaims a world crippled by human wickedness is by suffering it *himself* through me.

It means that suffering precedes glory.

It means that political might and violence are not the ways in which the Kingdom of God comes.

It means that God works differently than we might imagine he ought to.

It means that you will have to allow me to redefine your conception of what a Messiah is. And who I am.”

On Friday afternoon, as I was re-reading this text, I decided to try a thought experiment.

I tried to reconstruct the scene from Mark 8 but instead of it being in first century Palestine amongst a people steeped in a *Jewish* worldview, it would be in twenty-first century North America amongst a people steeped in a *Christian* worldview.

What might that look like? What might Jesus say?

“Who do people say that I am,” Jesus asks?

Well, some say you’re a pretty good man—a bit weird, but a pretty moral guy, and an inspiring teacher who loved peace. Some say you’re a religious fanatic—a lunatic who inspired centuries of religious intolerance and hatred.”

And then Jesus turns to you. To me. “What about you? *Who do you say that I am?*”

What would we say?

Here’s one possible answer—one we hear quite frequently in Christian circles: “Well, that’s easy Jesus. We know who you are. You’re our personal Lord and Saviour (a term that never appears in Scripture!).

And then Jesus would say... what? What would he say?

I think he would say, “Sure, you can call me your ‘personal Lord and Saviour.’ Now let me show you what that means.”

It means that you, *personally*, are called to be my hands and feet in a hurting world, to live a life of worship and service to others—a life of self-denial and sacrifice for the sake of those I love.

It means that you, *personally*, must decide if you are prepared to forfeit your soul—the deepest part of who you are as an image-bearer of God—by living exclusively for yourself and ignoring the full life I have made possible for you.

It means that you, *personally*, are called to move beyond an understanding of salvation where the status of your individual soul is more important to you than loving your neighbour as yourself.

It means that you, *personally*, must understand that I do not belong to you like a possession. You belong to me. You are a part of my plans, but my plans are much bigger than you.

That’s one idea of how the conversation might go. You might imagine a different one.

But the important thing to see is that we are in the same position as the disciples.

We all have our conceptions of who the “real Jesus” is and none of them are 100% correct.

Jesus is too big, too deep, too mysterious for us to grasp him in his totality. We must always be open to humbly being corrected and to have our understanding of who Jesus is reoriented by him.

Jesus had to give the disciples' understanding of who he was as their "Messiah" a facelift. He had to tell them what it meant to be a Messiah (he would later *show* them).

This "facelift" wasn't what they wanted or expected. But it was what they needed.

Are we open to meeting a Jesus that we may not want or expect?

Who do you say that I am?

Yesterday morning as I stood at the graveside of a ten-year-old girl in the cold rain, this question took on a bit of different feel than it ever had before.

These are the moments where the rubber hits the road. When you look out at a devastated family burying a daughter, a sister, a granddaughter...

You think—are all these words about heaven and hope just flowery ornamentation to make us feel better at times like these?

Or do they point to something *real*? Something hopeful and true and desperately necessary?

Who do you say that I am?

Well, Jesus, we say that you are the victor over death itself, the guarantor of eternal life, the one we believe emerged triumphant from the grave.

We believe that you promise a new creation where all things are made new, where "God's dwelling place is... among his people,"—where you "will wipe every tear from our eyes, where there will be no more death' or mourning or crying or pain" (Rev. 21).

And then Jesus says, *Yes, I know that Christians say these things. But what about you? What do you say?*

Yesterday, I found myself answering the question with newfound confidence, *Yes, Jesus, I believe all these words about newness and hope and the old order of things passing away... I believe that you are who you say you are, that you can do **even this**... That this little girl's story is not over... that none of our stories end in caskets in rainy cemeteries.*

I found myself thinking of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:

Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins... If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Whether we are asking the question in extraordinary circumstances when faith and hope seemed stretched to the breaking point, or in every day life when things are going reasonably well, Jesus never stops asking the question of us.

Who do you say that I am?

He asks it to you. He asks it to me. He asks it through Scripture, he asks it through friends and neighbours, he asks it through enemies, he asks it through pain and suffering and joy and triumph and all the circumstances of life we face.

Who do you say that I am?

The danger is to not realize that the question is addressed to each of us at each stage of our lives, to not realize that the invitation is always extended to us, to recommit ourselves to a lifetime of loving and learning about and growing in the knowledge of the real Jesus.

The Gospel of John ends with these words:

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.

It's an incredible image. Even the whole world cannot contain everything that can be said about this Jesus who graciously comes to us and shares himself with us.

We can rest secure in the knowledge that Jesus always gives enough of himself to us. We may never fully understand the “real Jesus”—at least not this side of eternity.

But Jesus still comes to us. He still shows us who he is. Sometimes gently, sometimes in frustration that we're *still* not getting it...

But always lovingly. Always with our best interests in mind. Always trying to remind us that his concerns are not necessarily the same as ours.

And always with the goal of conforming us to his image so that we might in turn love a world in need of “the real Jesus.”

Thanks be to God.

