

Proverbs 1:20-33
Psalm 19
James 3:1-12
Mark 8:27-38

Proper 19B
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island James
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Who Do You Say That I Am?

When my son Simon was little, our summer vacations were most often long road trips as far away as we could possibly go in the 10 or so days I had off. We often headed south and east, stopping at the KOA campgrounds of Simon's choice. His choices were sometimes based on whether or not there was a putt-putt golf course or an outdoor movie screen, but most often those choices were based on the natural surroundings. Simon loved to be outside, and hiking, fishing, rafting, swimming, campfires and sleeping under the stars were the best kind of fun for him. They still are.

From the time he was tiny, the majesty and mystery of nature moved him deeply. Once, when he was very little and we were out walking in the woods, out of the blue he turned to me, and said: "Mama, everybody knows that God is nature." Who do YOU say that I am?

Though philosophers and theologians might quibble with Simon's recognition of God, it may be that he was closer in his notion of God than a lot of really smart grown-ups are in theirs. What Simon knew of God was based in his little life experience. He experienced the holy in nature, not in doctrine. I studied a lot of doctrine, a lot of history and soteriology, ecclesiology, theology and lots of other ologies and while all of that is very important, I don't think we meet Jesus so much in ologies, as we do in the experiences of our lives.

It really is worth thinking about, this question of who we say Jesus is.

Just like those deeply faithful men (and yes, they were all men) who struggled so mightily to write a creed that spoke of God's true nature, we struggle too, and we may never find adequate words to perfectly describe Jesus Christ. Still, the question is worth pondering, and our responses are worth articulating. Because unlike most things, how we answer the question "Who do you say that I am?" IS actually a matter of salvation.

If we are followers of Jesus, and if Jesus is, in fact our Savior, then who we say Jesus is, is actually what saves us. If we are followers of Jesus, and if we say Jesus is the Son of the Living God, then who we say Jesus is, means that our lives ought to be godly too. If we are followers of Jesus, and if we say that Jesus is the face of God, the face of love in the world, then who we say Jesus is means that we too must be the face of love in the world.

It's kind of a scary question, really, and it has some pretty big implications. As it turns out, who we say Jesus is, tells us who we are, and how we're to live our lives. But what if we get it wrong? Even Peter, who so often got things wrong must have been a little nervous trying to answer that question "Who do you say that I am?" It was nice of Jesus to ease him into it by first asking what other people said. It's tempting to want to know what other people think, as if perhaps they know something that we don't. But it doesn't work that way.

Your answer to the question of who Jesus is for you isn't going to be wrong. It's going to be your answer, and just like Peter, you'll get it right not because you're so smart or extra special, or even because you're the head disciple. Peter got it right because God revealed to him through the experiences of his life, the reality that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, and so for Peter,

there was nothing to do but follow. The experiences of our lives, and particularly the relational experiences, are the very places where we come to know God. When God is revealed to us, whether we're on the top of a mountain, or leaning over our baby's crib, or looking into the face of the woman on the street whose reality is nothing like our own... when God is revealed to us, we're compelled to respond.

"Who do you say that I am?" Who we say Jesus is has a whole lot to do with who we are, and how we will live in the world. Not how we live in the church on Sunday, but how we live in the Monday through Saturday world, the world Sunday prepares us for. On Sunday we're reminded that we are set apart for God, for lives that really are holy. Not some sort of prudish, proper, holier than thou sort of holy life, but a life that has been set apart and consecrated for God's good work in the world. That really isn't a Sunday sort of Christianity – that's a Monday through Sunday way of life. When we allow our lives to be transformed because of how we know God in the love of Jesus Christ, then WE can become the ones who incarnate that love. And in order to do that, we have to believe in his Gospel of love.

We have to believe in a love so big, so broad, so deep and wide that we will never find its borders or boundaries. We have to believe in a love that recognizes the truth of our beautiful, beloved selves and the truth that every other child of God, no matter how irritating she might be, is also a beautiful beloved self. We have to believe in a love that sees or at least hopes for the best, not the worst in each other. We have to believe in a love that's big enough to set us free from a world that tells us we will never be rich enough or beautiful enough or hip enough or good enough. And when we finally do that, when we finally walk away from the overarching belief that the world of getting ahead at any cost and measuring ourselves against each other, the world of being sure we're getting what's ours whether it's money or prestige or power or attention, ONLY then we will be set free to live into the fullness of who and whose we really are.

When Jesus asked his friends "Who do you say that I am?" I don't think he was asking because he needed to know what people thought of him. I don't think he was asking for his own benefit at all. I think he asked that question of his disciples then, just as he asks us now, for our own benefit, because knowing who Jesus is changes our lives. When we know who Jesus is for us, we're set free from having to be what the world esteems, and made free to live into the fullest sort of life imaginable. When we know who Jesus is, we can believe in the God of love who actually loves us, the real truth of each one of us, the incredible beauty that God created specifically and especially in each and every one of us. And because we see and believe that, we see the beauty in those around us. It isn't easy, is it, believing that we are profoundly gifted, unspeakably beautiful and endlessly loved? But we are.

So who do you say Jesus is? I hope you'll take some time, maybe even a lot of time to think about that and even to try to articulate it for yourself, and when you've done that, write to me and tell me about it. Because when you know who Jesus is, something wonderful will happen for you. Not only will you come closer to Jesus, you'll come closer to the truth of your own life, and the power of your life in the world. Jesus walked the earth on feet just like ours. He healed people with hands just like ours. And he loved the whole wide world with a heart just like ours. To know Jesus is to know that we're those feet and hands and hearts in the world now, and that now it's our turn to love the world back into wholeness. Amen.