



Who Jesus Is

Matthew 16:13-16

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Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, still others Jeremiah, one of the prophets.”

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Every now and then Jesus quizzes the disciples to see how much they are getting. He does not hide his displeasure at their consistently low scores. So they are a little anxious when Jesus begins another review.

Jesus asks, “What are people saying about me?”

The disciples look nervously at each other, “Oh, no. He’s heard the talk.”

There is a lot of buzz about Jesus. He is all over Twitter. He usually seems glad to steer clear of the subject, but now he is asking, “Who do people say that I am?”

For all they know, he has googled himself. Religious leaders are asking, “By what authority does he do these things? Where did he go to seminary? Why should we listen to him?”

Jesus has heard the talk. The religious leaders are saying that Jesus eats with bad people, in their homes. He let a woman anoint his feet in public. He spends too much time with the blind, deaf, and lame—people who do not matter.

Religious bloggers are writing nasty stuff, “Birds of a feather flock together. You’re known by the company you keep. Jesus runs with bad company.”

“Who do people say that I am?”

One of the disciples finally responds: “Some say you’re John the Baptist. We know better than that, but after John was executed they started saying you were John risen from the dead.”

The others try to remember what they have heard: “Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets. They know you’re not normal.”

The disciples wait to hear the correct answer. Is it a, b, or c? But Jesus does not give them an answer. Instead Jesus looks them in the eye and asks a more difficult question, “But who do you say that I am?”

As soon as Jesus asks this question, the disciples look away. Some of them study their hands, while others move little piles of dirt around with their sandals. In the back of the room they go back to playing Super Mario, hoping the teacher will not call on them.

Who knows how long the silence lasts before Simon Peter—never comfortable with silence—breaks it with his answer? “You are the Christ, the son of the living God.”

The first question, “Who do people say I am?” is as easy for us as it was for the twelve. As Casey Stengel used to say, “You could look it up.”

The first person to write about Jesus was the apostle Paul, somewhere around the year 50 C.E. The first Gospel was not written until at least thirty years after Jesus’ death. The Gospels are the only real records we have of the life of Jesus.

Through the centuries writers have tried to answer the question, “Who do people say Jesus is?” Ernest Renan calls Jesus a “sentimental idealist.” Bruce Barton, a businessman, describes Jesus as “the greatest salesman who ever lived.” James Cone calls Jesus “The Black Messiah.” John A.T. Robinson claims Jesus is “the human face of God.” Paul Tillich calls him “the New Being.” Jurgen Moltmann says that Jesus is “the crucified God.”

The variety of responses to the question, “Who is Jesus?” makes us wonder if Jesus is an empty canvas on which people paint whatever they want. Religious art indicates that most people see Jesus in their own image. White Americans paint Jesus as a white American. The Asian knows a far eastern Jesus, the African a black Jesus, and the Swede a blonde one.

Do we decide what we believe and then assume that must be Jesus' view?

At church, we spend time on that first question, "Who do people say Jesus is?" We read the Bible and share our thoughts about Jesus. It may be that educated, liberal congregations like Plymouth avoid the second question by focusing on the first. We approach Jesus as a good teacher, who should be studied for his helpful ideas. We become aficionados of Christ, learning first century facts.

Christians discuss Jesus a lot, but talking about Jesus is different from being committed to Christ's way of living. We are tempted to talk about who Jesus is in religious terms that include our heads, but avoid our hearts.

The difference between "Who do people say that I am?" and "Who do you say that I am?" is only one word, but that one word makes a difference. The question moves from popular opinion to personal response. This question demands not so much the insight of our minds as the commitment of our hearts.

Michael Green, a British church historian, addressed a gathering of ministers and asked, "When was the last time you told your congregation what Jesus means to you?"

Some of the ministers were insulted. The question was too simple to be taken seriously. Their congregations expected more depth than that. But Martin Copenhaver, a pastor in Massachusetts, could not get the question out of his mind: "When was the last time you told your congregation what Jesus means to you?"

He thought about that question when he preached for the last time to his church of nine years. He used that occasion to tell them what Jesus means to him. He did not quote what others said about who Jesus is. He talked about who Jesus is to him.

At the conclusion of the service, he stood at the door and shook hands. One woman, a long-time member, came to the head of the line, but was so overcome with emotion that she

could not speak and went to the back of the line. He assumed that she did not know how to say good-bye. But when she finally made it to the front of the line again, her voice cracked as she asked, “Why didn’t you tell us this before?”

I am a Christian who has been in church all of my life, preaching more Sundays than not—and I have only been here sixteen months—but I do not often enough say, “This is who Jesus is to me.”

This is who Jesus is to me. Jesus is the reason I believe in God’s love. I am often disappointed in myself. I have been given a lot—a loving family, wonderful teachers, caring churches. I know I should be more. I should do more for the poor and the hurting. I should be farther along.

But as we read about Jesus, we hear that God comes as a loving family, a wonderful teacher, a caring church. God’s love is greater than our failures. The gospel is that God knows we are messed up and loves us anyway.

Jesus shows us that the whole world is filled with God’s goodness. God’s grace is part of each day. God has placed joy around every corner, beneath every circumstance. We just need to read the signs.

The Christian message stands or falls on the truth of God’s love. Our faith is not in making ourselves acceptable. Our faith is in the acceptance that Jesus taught. Jesus says there is grace for us, and for the whole world.

Jesus promises that one day God will make everything right. God will bring healing and wholeness. The story of Jesus is the story of God’s love.

This is who Jesus is to me. Jesus challenges me to have a life that matters. Jesus is not exactly what I want him to be. Jesus confronts, disturbs, distresses, troubles, bothers, interrupts, and unsettles me. If you only want a peaceful life, then you should steer clear of Jesus.

George McDonald tells this parable, “Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first,

perhaps, you can understand what God is doing. God is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on.

You knew that those jobs needed doing, so you're not surprised.

But presently God starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and doesn't seem to make sense. What on earth is God up to? The explanation is that God is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, and making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage, but God is building a palace, because God intends to come and live in it.”

C.S. Lewis writes, “Here's what Christ wants. Christ says, ‘Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work. I want you. No half-measures are any good. Hand over your life, all the desires which you think innocent as well as the ones you think wicked—the whole outfit. You give it all and then you'll receive all the grace you can imagine, a new life.’”

Jesus gathered disciples who listened to his message and were transformed by it. Jesus called them to care for the broken and the outcasts. Those first believers became the church.

God calls us to the same purpose, to be part of God's kingdom, to spend our lives learning Christ's way of seeing others. Jesus disturbs our selfishness, challenges our prejudices, and reorders our priorities. God wants to change us. Following Jesus makes your life difficult, but it is worth it.

This is who Jesus is to me. Jesus helps me believe in the possibility of eternity. I am fifty-six, so I have started to recognize that I have a finite number of years left. Some days I feel old. There is so much I would like to do. I am never going to get it all done. Running out of time is a painful prospect.

I would not believe in the hope of eternity if I did not know the story of Jesus. When I look at Christ, everything else matters less, except those things that matter forever. Jesus is the reason I believe in something beyond what I can imagine. I am

not at all clear on the details, but I cling to the hope that when I die, God will be there.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell this story of Jesus forcing the disciples to say who they believe him to be. In the Gospel of John, there is a similar story. On that occasion, most of Jesus' crowd has decided to desert him because they have discovered how hard it is to follow.

Jesus asks Simon Peter if he too will think better of the whole business and turn away. Peter answers, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

If anyone were ever to ask me if I could give up on following Christ, I hope I would repeat Simon Peter's words. I would say these words knowing that later on, of course, Peter ran away from Christ, denied knowing Jesus, but what Peter said comes as close to bedrock as anything I know, and says what I believe, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

At my ordination, one Christian saint placed his hands on my shoulder and whispered in my ear, "Hold tight to Jesus, and a little loose on everything else."

My life would be less without Christ. When we see the goodness of Jesus, we are overwhelmed, but we become just a little more like Jesus. In Jesus' laughter, we find our deepest joy. In Jesus' tears, we recognize our own. In Jesus' eyes, we see new possibilities.

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