

WHO IS JESUS?
Matthew 16: 13-20

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I have profound respect for all of the world's great religions. They each have gifts they bring to the world, lessons about ways to relate to God, how to live ethically, and how to restore harmony to creation.

Christianity is one of the religions whose core beliefs are connected to a person, a real person, a person who even secular historians tell us really lived and died, a person by the name of Jesus from a real place called Nazareth. Our faith contains plenty of mystery, but it also is accessible when we focus on this person Jesus. We have some of his words, we have stories he told, and we have stories about him - about the way he treated people, the community he formed, the lives he transformed.

When God seems hard for us to understand, in times when the concept of the Holy Spirit just seems too abstract, we can look at the gospels and see Jesus the person, eating, laughing, crying, in full humanity.

When I visited Israel a year and a half ago, I was surprised by some things and disappointed by others. I probably shouldn't have been, but I was surprised by the commercialization - the \$5.00 Mary-Martha t-shirts, the coffee shop called "Stars and Bucks". I was disappointed that some of the sites of the most important events in Jesus' life were no longer natural places but places where churches had been erected. I wanted to see the place where Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount, not a building on that place. I love beautiful churches, but I didn't want to see them in Israel. I wanted Israel to be the way it was when Jesus lived.

And there were also those places that felt incredibly holy. Being out on the Sea of Galilee. Walking along the shore of the sea. There were no billboards, no souvenir stands. It

looked probably the way it did when Jesus was there. When we drove from Galilee to Jerusalem, in the region of Samaria and saw shepherds and sheep from the side of the road, I imagined Jesus walking that same path and seeing similar scenes.

One day we drove up this slender finger in the Northeast part of Israel. We drove to the region formerly known as Caesarea Philippi, where today's scripture passage is set. To the east is Syria, to the north is Lebanon. There is now a nature preserve in the place where Jesus gathered with his disciples one day. Perhaps Jesus was taking an intentional moment to reflect on his life and ministry. A pause. A time of evaluation.

He had been traveling with the disciples. Teaching. Listening. Reaching out to people. A divine energy was being released into the world through him. An energy that included passion for justice. Healing and compassion for all people. Acceptance for the unacceptable. He was becoming popular. Good things were happening. Yet even when good things are happening, it's important, if not essential, to step back every now and then ask: "What is really going on? Where have I been? Where do I want to go? What is my life all about? Am I fulfilling my purpose?"

Jesus doesn't enter into this period of self-reflection alone. He wants his closest followers to participate. He asks them: "What are people saying about me?" It's a good question. The disciples begin rattling off the results of the most recent public opinion poll: "A certain percentage of people say that you are John the Baptist, or at least like John the Baptist. And some think you're the second coming of the great prophet Elijah. And still others believe you're stern and austere like Jeremiah or one of the great prophets from our tradition. In other words, Jesus, people are beginning to put you on the Mount Rushmore of Jewish prophets! You're really making a name for yourself. You're really going places, Jesus. Isn't that fantastic?"

How easy it would have been to stop there. Jesus was trending and going viral and lighting up social media in his first-century world. It all looked so positive. What more could he have wanted?

Yet, Jesus wasn't taking a poll. Jesus was trying to take the disciples to a deeper place. And that's why he turned to them and asked a more penetrating question. He said: "But who do you say that I am?"

That's when Peter, always impetuous, always ready with a quick answer, that's when Peter said: "You are the Messiah / the Christ / the Son of the living God."

How does it happen that Jesus, the real human person from Nazareth, becomes the Christ, the Messiah, the savior of his people, the one sent from God, the one indeed who IS God? That's a question scholars have debated ever since. Some people believe it happened before Jesus was ever born. The gospel of John begins with "In the beginning was the word...and the word became flesh..." John believes that there was this Spirit, if you will, called Christ, a divine Spirit present from the beginning of time, almost waiting to be matched with the right human being. The gospel of Luke with its story of a miraculous conception, angels visiting the shepherds...Luke who gives us so many details of the Christmas story, seems to be telling us that Jesus became more than just a human being when God chose Mary to be his mother. The gospel of Mark begins with the story of John baptizing Jesus. Jesus emerges from the water, the heavens part, and a voice says, "This is my beloved child, in whom I am well-pleased." For Mark it was Jesus' baptism that changes his identity from Jesus the man to Jesus the Christ.

Could it be that Jesus gradually grew into a different identity over the course of his adult life and ministry? Last week we heard the one story of his childhood, Jesus at age 12 sitting at the feet of the rabbi, an eager student soaking up knowledge and asking questions about the scriptures. His intellectual and spiritual foundation was formed. Later, he faced temptations

with courage, he preached in his home synagogue, he stood up to religious and political authorities, he discovered and used a gift for healing. A case could be made that Jesus gradually became something more than just a very talented spiritual human being.

Other people say that it was the final story of Jesus' life that transformed him. God saw his suffering on the cross and intervened after his death, so that never again would death, and evil and sin have the final word. At the moment of the resurrection Jesus becomes the Christ.

One of my religion professors in college described Jesus using this image. Look out these clear glass windows. If you look just right, you don't see the window at all; it is as if you are just seeing the outside. It is as if you ARE outside. I'm sure you've all had it happen to you once in your lifetime, that you walk straight into a large plate glass window, not aware that it's there. Let's say that God is the light, and God tries to shine through each human being. Most of us have moments when we shine, when we are the perfect vessels for God's love, when we allow God to work through us. But we also have many more moments when all of our shortcomings get in the way. We block the light for all kinds of reasons. Jesus was the one human being who allowed God to fully work through him, so that when you looked at Jesus, you saw God. They were one and the same. Jesus didn't let his ego or his selfishness or his laziness interfere at all.

It's an interesting question - who do you think Jesus is? But when Jesus gathered his disciples together, it wasn't just for the sake of argument. Jesus is not the professor who meets his students after class for a coffee or a beer and a good debate, just for the fun of it. He wants to know if the disciples are really comprehending his identity and his message. Are they just following him because he's in the spotlight and they enjoy being part of his entourage? Is his message getting through to people? He polls his inner circle as a way to see how he's doing with this enterprise to which he is giving his life and every ounce of his energy.

When is the last time you took one of those moments to step back and reflect on your life, an opportunity to ask yourself, “What are my core values? How am I choosing to live my life?” This story invites us, just as Jesus invited the disciples, to go deeper every now and then and ask ourselves some core questions. When you have a momentous decision to make, what criteria do you use? And, perhaps most importantly, how do you make all the small decisions each day - how to spend your time, how to spend your money, how to talk to the people with whom you interact, how to behave in traffic, how to nurture your intimate relationships...it is all of those so-called small day-to-day decisions which actually form our lives and our character. We may SAY we are a certain kind of person, but what do our actions reveal about us?

One writer says this about today’s passage:

“Jesus is God’s way of showing us how much God loves us and all people...God came to be like one of us, to live like one of us, in order to reveal just how God feels about us. In this sense, Jesus revealed God’s heart, a heart that aches with all who suffer depression and think seriously about ending their lives, a heart that is upset and angry [at injustice], a heart that is torn up in grief at the desperate situation and violence that rips apart the land we’ve named Holy, a heart that loves us like only an adoring parent can and so not only wants the best for us but is always eager to welcome us home in grace, forgiveness, and love.

But it’s more than that, too. I think Jesus also came to show us what’s possible. And so rather than give into the threat of disease, Jesus healed. Rather than surrender people to demons, Jesus showed compassion. Rather than let people starve because there’s not enough to go around, Jesus fed people who were hungry. Jesus refused to be satisfied or limited by the status quo and invites us to do the same, because if Jesus’ life and death show us how much God loves us, Jesus’ resurrection shows us that that love is more powerful than hate and fear and even death. Jesus shows us, in short, that God’s love wins.

And we who follow Jesus try to live lives that are filled with and sharing God's love, aware of the brokenness of the world but even more aware of God's grace and the power of the resurrection. It means that we look at all of life – our time, our relationships, our hopes, dreams, finances, and all the rest – through the lens of both the power and possibilities created by seeing God's heart laid bare in Jesus.

I don't think Jesus asks us to confess who we believe he is for his sake, but rather for ours, that we might be caught up in the power of his love and life."

What we say we believe is an interesting conversation. But what really matters is how we live.

Sources:

Sermon preached by Scott Colglazier, "The Energy That is Christ"

Column, "In the Meantime," by David Lose