

August 30, 2020 (Focus: Matthew 16:13-20)

When I was 12 years old, I had a fight with my best friend. To my face she still professed that she was my best friend, but she also said stuff about me to other people that put me down, very un-best friend sorts of stuff. We had been friends for about 7 years, and I was heartbroken. About the time that this break up took place, I got to stay overnight at my grandparents' house. Sitting at the kitchen table talking with my Grandma Stella, I remember asking her how someone could be like that, saying one thing but doing another, and wondering how could I ever trust another friend. She shared that what she usually did was to look at more than just what a person said they were. One also had to look at what others whom you trust said about the person, which reminded me of how other friends had warned me that she was not to be trusted. And Grandma Stella also said one had to look to a person's actions, and were they consistent with what a person said. And the final element for my Grandma was intuition, that is, the feeling or sense of what is right, which is guided by other things (what they say about selves, what others say about them, their actions). Those four things, she advised, taken together, would help me figure out who were my true friends, people I could trust.

We do this with our faith in God and Jesus. In scripture, what do they say about themselves, what did trusted witnesses say about them, and what actions are, what intuition says ("the Spirit", deepest longing,...).

Who do YOU say that I am? Jesus asked them. He knew the authorities had plenty to say about him and his ministry and the people he associated with. Pharisees and Sadducees and Romans: not unbiased, were threatened by someone they saw as competitor, instigator, revolutionary. They had an agenda, which included retaining their power over the people, so their witness of Jesus' identity was not to be trusted.

Who do you say that I am? His disciples were the people who knew Jesus best, who traveled with him, heard his sermons and parables and lessons, saw what he did for the bent-over woman and the man with demons and ..., were at the table with the sinners and tax collectors and knew what it meant to be welcomed at a table when no one else welcomed them. They witnessed his kindness, his mercy, his love.

And so they witnessed to who Jesus was, to their friends and neighbors, anyone who would listen. And they witnessed to us, through the gospels, through what he told Paul which he witnessed to in his letters. What did they witness to who Jesus was? Well, they witnessed, they experienced, Jesus as teacher, preacher, healer, friend. They also witnessed to the fact that they didn't fully understand all that Jesus was teaching them, and all that they sensed about who he was, what was his mission, and who they should be as his followers.

To a question so profound, Peter says just a few words. You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Did he ponder over the question Jesus posed to them long and hard, and then distill all his thoughts and understandings into a concise distillation of all that he believed about Jesus, or was this just the first thing that jumped out of his mouth, in his usual leap before you look away? What did he mean by messiah, what did he mean by living God, we have more questions for Peter. And we have questions for Jesus too – including who does he want us to say that he is?

For we have some fundamental differences about who Jesus is for us, and who we would say he is. That was made clear to us in the political conventions this month, not Christian events or even religious events per se, but certainly events where religion, and Jesus himself or at least someone's version of Jesus, was on full display. People use Jesus a lot, not to witness to the living God, not to witness even to Jesus as messiah, savior, one who saves, but as one's own personal deity, a statue, an image remade to resemble oneself, a necklace, a label, a litmus test, even a marker for who is in and who is out. People claim to know Jesus by reciting his words, as if reciting words alone makes you his follower. People claim to know who Jesus is with their words, while doing much to prove through their actions that they don't really know him or his teachings or his ministry at all.

Who do you say that I am? It's an awfully loaded question for a late summer morning, sunny and bright and the air clear and the temperature bearable and the earth bearing forth its fruit. It's an awfully loaded question for a time pregnant with issues of our own identity as a people, a time ripe with questions about what direction we will take as a nation, how we will be in community with one another, who is at the table, who is allowed to speak, who is allowed to breath. It is a time when we need Jesus, but which Jesus? A Jesus made to fit our image of ourselves but not our actions? Jesus with a crown, and a regal chair, the judge over the living and the dead. Or the Jesus who never promoted himself as king or leader, but who defined himself solely on who inspired him to act, the loving merciful gracious God, and who defined himself by who he was called to help, the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, and who defined himself by who he spent time with – all those who were seeking to know God better.

Who do you say that I am? Given everything else Jesus did, I don't think he asked that question simply to get his disciples to make a declaration about him and his ministry; it was not a test of faith or a creed he was looking for. I think he asked that question not for the question itself, but for what that question begs as the next question. "Who do you say that I am?" leads to "what difference will your answer make in your lives, in your way of living?" He showed us the answer to that question, in the great commandment, love one another, and whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me,...

If we preach Jesus, then what is our "platform"? Here's a version, from Paul's letter to the Romans:

Romans 12:9-21

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if

your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; ...
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.