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*“But who do you say that I am?”*

*Matthew 16:13-20*

**Rev. Elizabeth N.H. Link**

**Matthew 16:13-20 (NRSV)**

<sup>13</sup>Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” <sup>14</sup>And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” <sup>15</sup>He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” <sup>16</sup>Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” <sup>17</sup>And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup>And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup>I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” <sup>20</sup>Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

**Sermon:**

One of my least favorite phrases is, “People are saying.” As a college advisor warned, “People” almost always means the person standing right in front of you. “People are saying,” is a safe phrase most often used to share an opinion we’re afraid to say aloud or on our own.

At the heart of our passage is not what people are saying about Jesus, but what Jesus’ followers say about him. What claim are the disciples willing to stake when it goes against what people are saying, when it requires bravery to stand up and say what they believe because their



claim is dangerous? What is the source of truth in the face of deception and confusion? Where can we find courage to speak truth, sometimes alone, sometimes at great cost?

Before Jesus posed this identity question to his disciples, Jesus fed a multitude (if you haven't seen it already, check out the Wardell family's inspired interpretation of this miracle in their Staycation Bible School video). Immediately after that miracle, Jesus was tested by some Pharisees and Sadducees asking for a sign from heaven. The disciples misunderstood him, presuming him to be talking about actual bread, and Jesus responded, "O you of little faith, why are you still talking about bread?" (v8 paraphrased).

Up to this point, Matthew has been riddled with themes of misunderstanding about Jesus' identity, his actions, and his signs. It's been one confusion after the next:

- John the Baptist in 11:2-3, "are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"
- The crowd in 12:22-23 asks, "This can't be the Son of David, can it?"
- His hometown folks in Nazareth in 13:55 ask, "Is not this the carpenter's son?"
- Herod Antipas in 14:1-2: "This is John the Baptist; he has been raised from the dead...!"
- In Jen's passage from last week, Matthew 14, when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, "It is a ghost!"

The Gospel's been building to this question from Jesus. We have known since chapter one that Jesus was the Messiah, and it's taken this long for the truth to come out of the mouth of a disciple.

Before asking the dangerous question, "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asked his followers the safe question, "Who do others say that I am?" Safe because to answer it required no conviction, no commitment, and no risk. All it requires to answer the safe question is a bit of curiosity, or perhaps cynicism.

Apparently there had been a lot of speculation, rumors swirling around, a lot of wondering among those who followed and listened to Jesus—most of it well off the mark. It's pretty much the same today.

People still wonder about Jesus. I wonder about him. At least once a year Jesus shows up on the cover of *Time* magazine or *Newsweek* because people still wonder about him.

Who do people say that he is? Some say a great moral and political leader like Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. Some say a great prophet like Elijah or Muhammad. Still others say a great spiritual teacher to be numbered with the likes of the Buddha, Confucius, or the Dalai Lama.

Some say he was a political revolutionary and enlist him in their own cause. Some say he was a capitalist and do the same. There are those who say he was clearly a socialist, and others who are



just as sure that he was a liberal Democrat. Many Republicans eagerly claim him as one of their own. Still others say he was but a dreamy idealist with his head in the clouds.

As N.T. Wright writes, “What you say about Jesus affects your entire worldview. If you see Jesus differently, everything changes.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus' question, “Who do you say that I am?” is an invitation to take personally and seriously the necessity to answer this question for ourselves.

When I was a girl, I remember vividly the Sunday morning my mother told me to stand up straight, quit leaning on the pew in front of me, and confess what I believed as though Jesus himself were standing at the front of the church. I was about 10 or 11 years old. Until that moment, I'd said the Apostles' Creed with the gusto and conviction of someone ready to leave for a fancy lunch with her grandmother and wondering when the pastor was going to get on with the benediction already. But ever since that Sunday, I've wondered what I would say to Jesus himself if he were standing before me and asked, “Who do you say that I am?” and, also, I don't slouch when I say the Apostles' Creed anymore.

I confess that Jesus is my Savior, but the honest truth is I don't always live my life like someone so convinced that Jesus is Lord. I mean, if you looked at my life as that living testimony, could you tell I believed it? I mean, you Second Pres., get (for the most part) the best version of myself. I show up for work in my office or on your Zoom screen or in this pulpit looking like I have it together. But what you didn't see was the way I lost my cool with our two-year-old who refused to wear sensible shoes to the zoo last week, or the tone I used when I or spoke sharply in response to an ill-informed political comment from an extended family member, or the times I've backed down when I knew I was supposed to be brave enough to speak up, or the moments when I've really questioned our future in a post-COVID world.

If actions speak louder than words—and you and I know they do—then I have to admit that most of my actions don't confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Rather, they testify that he is a good man, a great man, an example to follow, someone to be inspired by, kind of like the prophets of old.

I suspect that I am not alone in sensing the disconnect between my public confession and my everyday actions. I am willing to bet most of you also sense a gap between the words you say on Sunday (or whenever you watch worship these days) and the lives you lead the rest of the week. Not intentionally, of course, and certainly with no malice intended. In fact, I suspect that most of us would like the words we say on Sunday not just to align with the rest of our lives but to actually matter, day in and day out.

Eleanor asked me the other day if Jesus lived at church. (This is a normal question for a young child to ask, but it actually made me a little sad. She hasn't been able to come to church in months. I wondered, has she been looking for him all this time? And thought she couldn't find him because she couldn't get to church?) I answered her that Jesus lives in our hearts—that he's not in



these walls—but with us every day. *Flashback to that zoo wardrobe fiasco—I sure wasn't showing her Jesus was in my heart in that moment. No wonder she thought he must be someplace else.*

I want to show with my words and my actions who I believe Jesus to be...

So, I spent some time this weekend considering how I would answer Jesus' question to Peter. "Who do you say that I am?"

I say that Jesus is God with us. God loved us so much that God couldn't leave us the way we are, so God did the unthinkable thing for a deity: God became human and lived and loved and ate and talked and taught and healed and performed miracles and was despised for it and died—all so God could show us how deep and how great God's love is. I say that Jesus rose from the grave and lives today. I say that because he lives, we have new life. Because he lives, we are called to live differently. Because he lives, he cares what happens to us and what we do to and for each other.

I say that Jesus wept for us then, and he weeps for us now. Just like God's heart was broken open for us in the person of Jesus, so does

- that heart break open when one of us suffers from addiction and damages our body and our relationships,
- that heart breaks open when one of us is weighed down by depression and thinks seriously about ending our lives,
- that heart breaks open when the vulnerable in our society are made even more unsafe and isolated in the living of these days,
- that heart breaks open when teachers and children and parents and the under- and unemployed are crippled with anxiety about how they're going to get through the months ahead.

And then I think of Peter. Peter, the rock, the one on whom Jesus would build his church. "Church." Interestingly, this is the first and only time a gospel-writer uses the word "church." This one, "the rock," the chip off the old block, the chip off the "Rock of Ages," will fall short in just a few chapters. He's got it all right here, but it's not long before Peter's actions don't reflect his words. The shadow of the cross will prove too much for him, and when given the chance to bravely speak the truth, he will deny it. He will deny Jesus in his darkest hour. But when the resurrected Jesus meets him on the beach one morning, he doesn't stand like an angry parent waiting to scold the wayward child. No. Jesus stands like that loving parent who is always eager to welcome us home in grace, forgiveness, and love.

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," Peter said. Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." God was at work in Peter, imperfect Peter.



John Calvin, in discussing this passage, takes the phrase from Ephesians 2:8, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,” and Calvin twists it a little, saying, “Faith is of grace, not of nature.” We have been saved through faith, but we have faith through grace. The ability to speak the truth at all times is a gift from God and an act of God. Followers of Jesus can be swayed, corrupted, hoodwinked, when we rely on our own will to believe, our desires, our reason, and our fears. But the truth is that which comes from God in Christ Jesus.

My friends, who do you say that Jesus is? If you knew no one were looking over your shoulder—if it were you and Jesus standing face to face, how would you express your confession? How does your life reflect what you believe, with your relationships, your bank account, your time, your social media presence, the ways you vote, your energy, and all the rest?

Jesus’ question to Peter is an invitation to answer this question for ourselves. It is an invitation to stand upright before Jesus our Lord and really live like he’s watching, because he is. Not to judge us or trap us, but because he loves us and he sees that side of us that can be brave and kind and faithful and true.

“But who do you say that I am?” *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”* May we live like we believe it to be true. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 1996.

