

Scripture Reading:
Matthew 16:13-20

Who Do You Say That I Am?

When I first pondered this passage I drew a complete blank. Perhaps its the quiet office in the midst of August that finds my inspiration drying up; or perhaps its a bit of the heart break I am feeling with the tragedies that are surrounding our world at this time - I find my heart heavy and longing for peace and hope for our generations.

So when I first read a passage with Jesus asking “Who do you say that I am?” and then offering Peter the key’s the kingdom I thought to myself “This is not relevant - we have important matters to consider at this time.” But then I read an article by David Lose and it really connected for me. *(I so appreciated David Loses’s reflection on this passage I am going to give you a paraphrase of his work today.¹)*

Often I am more like the disciples and followers of Jesus who liken him to John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the other prophets. Not that those are bad people to emulate, or be put into categories with, and yet deep down I truly believe Jesus has to be more than that. But being that we are not in a culture that is searching for “The Messiah” I think even I sometimes find it hard to say who Jesus is. I would like to have the confidence and knowledge of Peter but I am not sure I do. I say that because I think if I did have the confidence I am pretty sure I would live differently.

Lose puts it this way “if actions speak louder than words – and you and I both 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, even, 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 beliefs and my everyday actions. I think most of people know that there is a gap between the words they say on Sunday and the lives they lead the rest of the week. Not intentionally, and certainly with no malice or forethought. 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 actually to matter day in and day out.”

This reminds me of a devotional I read by Matt Fitzgerald - he shares this story:

“I once worked with a waiter I’ll call Alex. His car was *covered* in bumper stickers proclaiming an admirable allegiance to every social justice cause imaginable. His heart was on fire for the

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/08/pentecost-11-a-who-do-you-say-i-am/>

plight of Native Americans, marginalized workers, the earth, oppressed minorities everywhere.

But he was awful to work with. He'd steal tables from other waiters, shout at the dishwashers, refuse to tip out the busboys. He didn't say "hello" at the start of a shift. He didn't say "goodbye" when he left. He was unfailingly rude.

One night after Alex marched out, an older waiter leaned against the bar and sighed. "Alex is one of those hippies who loves humanity but can't stand people."

He loved everyone—except for the people he was with. But as William Willimon notes, "Loving the person next to you is precisely where universal love is authenticated."

You don't have to feel affectionate toward whoever is next to you. Warm feelings are not what Jesus meant when he commanded love. He meant dogged, tenacious, commitment. The kind of love God has for us. In Douglas Hare's words, "The primary component of biblical love is not affection but commitment."

Anybody can slap a bumper sticker on their car. But it takes a real Christian to be kind to an exasperating colleague, *patient with a long-winded church member* or committed to an ornery teenager.

Perhaps this sounds too limited. Maybe you're worried about those outside our walls. Here is the remarkable thing. When you practice Christ-like love inside your walls, at work or home or church, you'll soon discover that those walls cannot hope to contain it."²

How true is that? If we walked the path of Jesus, if our lives confessed who he was - would we not be different every day? Now I have no desire to take you on a guilt trip, rather I wonder if we might ask ourselves a question or two. The question is "Who do you say Jesus is?" Not just when you recite a prayer or a creed "but say with your lives; that is, with your relationships, your bank account, your time, your energy, and all the rest. Who do you really say Jesus is?"

Let's "wonder together for a moment or two what we actually *mean* when we say, with Peter, that Jesus is the Messiah, Son of the Living God. Or that Jesus is Lord. Or, for the theologically inclined, that Jesus is the second member of the Trinity....

You see, I think it's really hard to align our lives with our confession when we don't really understand what that confession means. And I'm not sure most of us really do – myself included. We can take some comfort, I think, that Peter didn't understand what he said either, (For, In next weeks scripture Jesus says to Peter "Get behind me Satan" so we can be reassured he didn't have Jesus all figured out either.)

² Fake Hippy Love Matt Fitzgerald

Because *the person that* Jesus was and is, is really hard to put into words that we can understand. And so we come up with titles and formulations and all the rest, trying to get at the mystery of what God has done in and through Jesus, and that's understandable. But all too often I fear that those words only keep the wild and unpredictable God of love and grace at arms distance from us, and Jesus remains inspiring and exemplary, but ultimately rather tame and eminently safe, kind of like the prophets of old seem to us.

So I wonder - who do you say Jesus is?

Now that you have given it a bit of a try - I will also (incorporating much of what Lose says, but speaks to how I'm feeling in this time when our world seems to be tearing itself apart). Let me start by saying I know this will be limited and I know who Jesus is for us changes as our lives change but here is a start for a moment in time -as I considered who Jesus the Messiah is in 2014 on a hot August afternoon.

I think Jesus is first and for most Grace and Love. He is God's way of showing us how much God loves us and all *of creation*. God is so vast and full of mystery that I think we have a hard time understanding and connecting with the Holy. And so God came to be like one of us, to live like one of us, in order to reveal just how God feels about us. Jesus was the one who welcomed the outcast, the sinner, the underdog and any who were willing to accept any kind of grace and love. 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 when a young black man is shot dead for no explicable reason, 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, to show us how to live with the kind of hope, love and grace we were created for. "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."

So this is probably too wordy, and I know there are components missing but it is a start, and it is where my heart is today. And perhaps it helps us understand what it means when we say who Jesus is. Or why we follow him at all.

As Lose says "when I formulate it this way I have an easier time imagining what it means for me to confess Jesus as Messiah and Lord. Because I think it means that I try to live 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, I think, that I look at all of my life – my time, my

relationships, my 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.”

What would it look like if we let our confession of who Jesus is shape our lives?

Perhaps you read the paper article written last week that spoke to this too. It said “if we really want people to come to church and faith, if we really want folks to know who the messiah is than we have a role to play in living and loving differently. What if we were to glow with joy because of our faith, I wonder how it would be for folks if we were so filled with love and joy that you could see it shining through us. I long for that kind of faith. If someone looks at you, can they see that you have been changed by God’s love? Does the light shine through you? Do you have a peace they want? Do you live a life filled with grace? If so, good news! That is who we are called to be and that is who the Messiah, Jesus was.

“Because the thing is, 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.” Perhaps the professions we make about “Jesus in church and in our daily lives aren’t finally words of praise to God but rather are words of power that help root us in the love and possibility that Jesus offers? No doubt it takes time for all this to sink in... But perhaps if we start this week, over time we’ll sink deep into those words so that they shape every part of our lives.”

May it be so, Amen.