

13th Sunday after Pentecost August 27, 2023

Romans 12:1-8: Matthew 16:13-20

Who have you been saying that I am?

Jesus asks this of his disciples, those who have been following in his footsteps these last months (years?). Who lived alongside him. Who have seen up close and personal the conflicts, the healings. Who have bathed in his teaching both formal and informal.

Jesus asks this in Casarea Philippi. A location in Galilee that evoked many and varied nationalistic and religious associations. Both Jewish and pagan. A place named for the Roman emperor and the son of King Herod, Philip, a ruler under the empire of Rome.

Jesus asks them this question in the context of a place that reminded them of their occupation by the Roman Empire, of their history, of the myriad of gods many of the powerful around them served. Who are you saying that I am?

The question is not a pop quiz. Define who I am.

Rather, it is a call to give an accounting for what they have already been saying about who Jesus is. What have you been saying, in word and deed, about who I am? Especially as people know you to be my followers, my disciples. Those who bear my name, who represent me to the world.

Peter, solid, impulsive, perhaps not the sharpest knife in the drawer, responds more as if it were a pop quiz and, in the moment, says, "You are the Messiah. The son of the Living God!" The word used to describe this moment by Jesus, is the

root for our word apocalypse- which does not mean impending disaster, but rather a pulling back of the curtain, a look into the core of something, a revelation. This pulling back of the curtain to see Jesus as Messiah did not come from Peter, but rather was something that God did for him. Flesh and blood did not reveal this, but rather God in heaven.

And Peter is correct. Jesus is the Messiah, the son of the Living God! But even so, he doesn't fully comprehend what that means. His definition of Messiah would be a great warrior, prince, ruler. One who would raise an army and violently throw out the occupying Romans, the corrupt Herodians who ruled as puppets of the occupiers. Who would cleanse the nation of Israel and rise up as a beacon of God's might to the world. But this view will lead next week to Peter being called not a solid foundation on which the church will be built... but Satan, a stumbling block trying to trip people up. But that's for next week.

Who have you been saying that I am, Jesus asks us. Today. His disciples, his followers. In how you live and speak, as people know you to be my followers (we bear the name Christ-ians after all) who have you been saying that I am?

Perhaps the better question would be, based on what you have been saying to others in your words and actions, who would they say that I am? Based on the church that is the Body of Christ in the world, who would people say that Jesus is?

A better question, but also, perhaps, a more difficult one.

One that proves both the individual and communal nature of our faith. For I might do well at that in my own life, but if the greater whole of the church is "saying" something different, what will folks "hear"?

What have we been saying, and does it match who Jesus is really? Or have we become servants of the deceiver, caught up in the vision of the world of Empire and Herod, sweet talked into placing other gods before the one who is creator of the world? Have we been proclaiming the Jesus who comes to us in the pages of scripture, through the millennia's long witness of the church, or have we been proclaiming a false Christ made in our own image? Or something in between? We'll talk more about that next week.

This week is about when we get it right. When we get it right, it is God's doing. This is Third Article of the Creed stuff here. Luther's explanation of which reminds us that we cannot believe in Jesus Christ our Lord or come to him on our own. Rather, it is through the power of the Holy Spirit that we get it right. It is not flesh and blood, our own work or intellect or doing, that helps us to see. Rather, it is God's Spirit that pulls back the curtain.

How does it do that? As we encounter that Spirit in the Word of God. The Word that is Jesus, come to us in scripture- read and sung, in bread and wine that are eaten and drunk, in the proclamation and conversation of people about their encounters with the risen Christ.

When it comes, we are reminded by Christ that it is his ekklesia. It is his church, not ours. That we are all, as Paul reminds us, members of that body. And that every one of us is important. The church is something that is like all else we have in this life- something gifted to us that we do not own. Something that we are members of, but we are not the head. That is Christ, for it is his church. His Body.

What that means is that we approach this life together as church totally different from anything else in our lives because in many ways we do not guide it or control

it. And when we do, when we decide that Jesus' way of doing things is weak, ridiculous, foolish, then it becomes something other than the Body of Christ. But more on that next week.

What happens when we lean into what God through the Holy Spirit has revealed to us? That Jesus is the Messiah. When we understand what that means- death on a cross, resurrection, mercy, love, grace. What happens when we trust that each of us has been gifted by God with skills, abilities, talents that are not only necessary but vital for the church to be what it has been called to be in the world?

What happens is amazing things.

Especially because often we do things the world does not. And are so much better for it. Because, as we sing sometimes, the church is not a business, a committee or a board; it's not a corporation for the business of the Lord.

The late Mike Yaconelli wrote in his book *Messy Spirituality* about this foolishness of the church. He shared the story of Connie, a young woman in his father's church who came forward to read one morning. Connie had stifled her desire to serve in the church because of her "incompetencies". Reading was very difficult for her- she had a hard time enunciating clearly. She stammered, stuttered and stumbled. Her body was awkward, with one leg shorter than the other, her head would twist back and forth at odd angles while her face wrenched from one grimace to another.

But she had been at the church long enough to learn about God's grace. Jesus didn't just die for our sins; he died so people who couldn't read and speak could read and speak. Now she could serve the Jesus she loved so much. When she

was finished the reading Connie was ecstatic, how wonderful it was to no longer be a spectator in church; she was the church this morning!

The assembly had sat silently through her reading, with its sequences of untranslatable sounds, garbled sentences, long pauses, jumbled phrases. And when the service was over they held an emergency board meeting and called Yaconelli's father, the pastor, to account. How did this happen! What were you thinking!

His reply, Connie wanted to read the scripture. Let her do something else! Her reading took ten minutes and the church is not a place for incompetence. Yaconelli ends the story this way, "My father believes, as I do, that the church is the place where the incompetent, the unfinished, and even the unhealthy are welcome."

This is the place, where everyone's gifts are not only welcome, but necessary for the church to be fully what it is called to be. A visible sign of Christ's presence in the world. An outpost of what the reign of God looks like. A place where we look deeper at people and what they do. Where you are valued because you are part of this Body, not because you are perfect or competent. Where we hear in the garbled words of Connie not something incomprehensible, but a visible sign of what the love of God in Jesus Christ calls forth from us.

Love for others that reflects the love Jesus has for us. A love that looks past our flaws, foibles, imperfections and sees the wondrous creation that God calls not only good, but very good. That is what defines you in the eyes of God and, when we are at our best, in the eyes of the church. A perfectly imperfect but oh so beloved child of God.

A desire to be in relationship with others that leads to forgiveness. True forgiveness, like God's, where the offense is not tucked away to be pulled out when they do something to really hurt us, but where it is blotted out, erased. Where our relationship is rebooted and it is literally as if it never happened. Forgive and forget. Just as God does for us. For how we fall short in loving God with all we are and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Grace. Undeserved and unearned, but oh so welcome. The ultimate result when we truly see in another the wondrous image of God. When we love them with the same wild abandon as God in Jesus loves us. Then grace just comes. Free flowing.

And, together, we can bring this into the world. We can proclaim in word and deed that this... this love, forgiveness, grace... this is who Jesus is. And it is for everyone.

But it takes all of us, together. Each of you has gifts we need to do the mission and ministry that God in Jesus has called us as St. John Lutheran Church in Ely, IA to. Gifts of hospitality and service. Gifts of encouragement and teaching. Gifts of working with your hands and organizing things. Gifts of reading, singing, and music.

Gifts that, when brought together, answer Jesus' question.

Who are you saying that I am?

