

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

Mark 8:27-38

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It's often been said that asking the right question is more important than knowing a lot of answers. The German philosopher Leibnitz once said that if God held all knowledge and truth in the right hand and the search for truth in the left hand, he would choose the left hand every time. Not everyone feels the same way. Socrates preferred questions, while Aristotle proposed a lot of answers. Inventors and scientists depend heavily on asking questions, while engineers and manufacturers base their work on the answers. Many look to religion for answers while others understand faith as a way of living with the questions.

Along these lines, there are some who claim to know the rules for securing a place in heaven, while others ponder the meaning of heaven; some who are certain of God's position on a variety of social, political, and moral issues, while others believe that we need to struggle for our own answers.

There are some who find answers in the Bible on what to believe and how to live, while others recognize that the answers must still be filtered through the basic questions: "How does this apply to the world today and to my life in particular?"

After forty years of teaching the Bible much of my "knowledge" comes in the form of disclaimers. God does not condemn to hell two people of the same gender for loving each other. God does not turn her back on women who have had abortions. Hell is not a place of eternal fire and torment for sinners. In our quest for answers we have greatly oversimplified the Bible and God.

In my role as a pastor, people sometimes look to me for answers about the meaning of a particular passage of the Bible. Usually I'm happy to provide an answer, but sometimes I want people to work through to their own answer. It's important to sit with the question. This is what we hope to encourage you to do during Lent this year. We've chosen scriptures where Jesus asks questions, the sort of questions that address not just the characters in the biblical story, but might speak to you as well in your circumstances.

We find four questions in this morning's reading. The first question invites us into the conversation. "Who do people say that I am?" The disciples understand right away that Jesus is not asking about his name, his family, or his occupation. Talk has been going around that Jesus is not just your average rabbi. Somehow he figures into the history of Israel's faith. He plays some vital role.

Well, the disciples have been paying attention and the answers come. “Some say you’re like John the Baptist picking up his call for the renewal of faith. Some say you’re even bigger, go back farther, like Elijah. Some say, you belong to the tradition of the prophets and maybe you’re bringing something new.”

This conversation continues even today. The church has a long history of making statements about Jesus. There was quite a bit of controversy surrounding the answers when the council of Nicaea pronounced Jesus as “fully human, fully God.” Since the fourth century others have elaborated on this formula, emphasizing one side or the other. In the 19th century we had the “quest for the historical Jesus” which emphasized the “Jesus of Nazareth. Process theology emphasized the Christ as one who transcends history. Matthew Fox coined the term “the Cosmic Christ.”

We had a whole course in seminary that was really about this question: “Who do people say that I am?” We read from Leonardo Boff, a Latin American theologian; from Reinhold Niebuhr, a well-known theologian out of Union Seminary in New York; from John Cobb and a host of others. We call this whole conversation, “Christology.” I loved this course and it was important for shaping my understanding of Jesus as it is today. But it’s just the first question, and it sounds a bit academic, impersonal. Important - I mean Jesus doesn’t ask unimportant questions - but it doesn’t quite connect with life yet.

In the end, what matters is not what others think, but what you think. “Who do you say that I am?” There is an enormous temptation for preachers to just answer this question, to tell you the “right” answer. But then that would take us back to the previous question, to the question about what others say. This question is as much about you as it is about Jesus. It invites you to reflect, to ponder everything you’ve heard and to take your own stand based on what you’ve heard and what you feel in your own heart. Who is Jesus to you... to you?

Lent always brings us back to this. In the end you will not be held accountable for what Niebuhr or Joan Chittister or Richard Rohr said about Jesus. Your life will be impacted by what you think. No one can be a disciple for someone else. You must decide to follow Jesus and that process begins with deciding who he is at this moment in your life.

Now I don’t want to get too distracted by answers, but Peter offers one that seems to satisfy Jesus. Peter is smart enough to be brief, a single word: “Messiah.” He adds a little to this in Matthew’s version of this story, but really, it’s nothing next to the volumes of books that have been written over the centuries just to say what this one word means. Again the preacher is tempted to offer an explanation for Peter’s answer, but there is good reason to resist. In a few verses, it becomes clear that Peter really didn’t understand what he said. Jesus implicitly approves his answer and then goes on to talk about the things that are about to happen to the Messiah. He’s headed for Jerusalem where all the important people in the world will reject him and kill him... but not even death will keep him down.

Peter takes Jesus aside, tells Jesus how wrong he is, because, well, doesn't everyone want a Messiah? Peter's answer is absolutely right, but it's only the beginning of his search to understand Jesus. As they journey to Jerusalem Jesus' will heal people and Peter will have to go back to the question: "Who is this Jesus? Is this what the Messiah does?" And he'll have to keep coming back to the question as Jesus offers teaching and says things that raise conflict, that upset people, and that will stir up fear and hatred among the authorities. Peter's life will become shaped by his quest to understand Jesus. To follow Jesus at all is to be shaped by the desire to know him in each new circumstance.

Peter's misunderstanding leads to two more questions. He seems to think that the Messiah will bring a reversal to his fortunes, that the Romans will no longer control his life, that Jesus will just get rid of all his problems. You could understand why it's all a bit much for Peter when Jesus tells him that being Messiah only brings on more problems. Following Jesus isn't an escape from the challenges of life. It's not a free pass to the easy life.

The first question reminds us to rethink the things that make up a life well-lived. "What will it profit to gain the whole world and lose life?" How many child prodigies have lost their childhood to their parents' desire to push them along and develop their gifts as quickly as possible? How many Olympic athletes have sacrificed relationships to their drive to be the best? How many have sacrificed marriages to their dedication to the job? What have we lost in the thirst for wealth, in the drive for power? How many have neglected their neighbor in their obsession with their own needs? How many have lost their lives in order to achieve success by the standards of the world?

If we are to be shaped by our desire to understand and follow Jesus, then we will inevitably face the challenge maintaining a healthy soul in a world that wants us to look out for ourselves alone.

The second question encourages us to take the first out of the abstract and make it personal. It's a little easier to see this if we change the pronoun. "What can you give in return for your life?"

Notice the shifts in the four questions: From what others think to what you think in the first two, and from getting to giving in the second two. The first set of questions remind us that Jesus is not an academic exercise. We don't ultimately understand Jesus through the ideas of others, but only as we make Jesus personal. It's the difference between knowing about someone and knowing someone.

The second set of questions are a response to our growing knowledge of and love for Jesus. Our focus shifts from what we can acquire in life to what we can offer to the world. Who do you say that I am? What will you give in exchange for life? Two very good Lenten questions. They are not questions to be answered in a single moment of life, but they guide and shape the whole of our lives; and of course, they can only be answered ... by you. Amen.