

Sermon For Sunday, August 27, 2017 - "Who Do YOU Say That I Am?"

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 27, 2017
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Marion Pruitt-Jefferson

Matthew 16: 13-20

Who Do YOU Say That I Am?

Beloved of God,
Grace and peace to you from Jesus our brother, and the Holy Spirit, our comforter and guide.

I'm going to take a little bit of a risk this morning, and ask you to talk with each other just for a couple of minutes. I'd simply like to invite you to turn to those who are near you and together, in groups of 3 or 4, talk about the question Jesus is asking us today: Who do you say that I am? It may feel a little scary to do this – it may feel a bit outside your comfort zone - but please give it a try. And don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to report to the whole congregation.

Thank you for that.

When Jesus and his disciples arrived in Caesarea Philippi, he asks them two questions. The first one is, "Who do the people say that the Son of Man is?" - Son of Man, of course, being the way in which Jesus refers to himself. The disciples chime in with several answers, but they all boil down to the same thing. The people think that Jesus is any number of dead prophets who have returned to life, including his own recently deceased cousin, John.

Jesus doesn't comment on these various theories about his identity, either by dismissing them or affirming them. Instead, he goes directly onto the much more important question: "Who do YOU say that I am?" After all that Jesus and his disciples have shared - the teachings, healings, feedings, and stilling of storms - Jesus wants to know if they're beginning to understand who he truly is. And he asks this question of ALL of them, not just one specific disciple. In the Greek, the YOU in "Who do YOU say that I am?" is plural. A better translation might be something like - Who do YOU ALL say that I am?

But there doesn't appear to have been time for the disciples to confer with one another because Peter shouts out, "You are the Messiah, the Christ, the son of the living God." Jesus celebrates this inspired answer calling Peter blessed because he has received this truth from God, not from his own wisdom or intellect. I imagine this scene to be like a classroom where there's always that one kid who blurts out the answer before anyone else even has time to raise their hand. Peter is impulsive and headstrong – the one who's always jumping in while the others hold back. In this case, that's a good thing. But, it is also a deep flaw in Peter's character which we'll hear more about next week.

For now, it's enough for us to realize that in choosing Peter to be the rock on which to build his church, Jesus has blessed, called and sanctified all of us who know ourselves to be flawed, imperfect people, full of contradictions, as capable of love and compassion as we are of hatred and fear. The good news is that Jesus builds his church not with perfect saints, but with forgiven sinners. Jesus' call is a "come as you are" invitation to be part of this thing we call "church" – to be a member not of simply a human institution, but to be a member of what Paul declares is the body of Christ, Jesus' risen body in the world now. This is our truest identity; we are members of the body of Christ – together. Each of our individual identities, gifts, and characteristics is cherished and valued, and each contributes to the whole body. But, it is in our collective identity as the body of Christ that we best carry out our calling to be Jesus in the world today.

So, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, this gathering of beloved saints and sinners, this local expression of the body of Christ at 701 Iowa Avenue: How do we answer Jesus' question? Who do we say that Jesus is? Well for one thing, when we say the Apostles' Creed we declare with Peter that Jesus Christ is the son of the living God, the one who forgives sins and raises the dead.

We say that Jesus welcomes all with no exceptions. Take a look at the first page of our worship bulletin. It's filled with words of welcome. We welcome guests and visitors in worship and fellowship.

We say that Jesus feeds us at Holy Communion and that Jesus welcomes everyone at the table - no prerequisites, no barriers, no litmus test.

We say that Jesus loves children and that we welcome the noise and energy they bring to our community.

We say that Jesus always stands on the side of the poor and oppressed, and so we advocate for justice for all people.

We are a Reconciling in Christ congregation, committed to welcoming and embracing all people regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. This continues to be an important aspect of who we are, especially as the rights of transgender individuals are being threatened.

We are an AAMPARO congregation – part of a network of congregations that is committed to accompanying and advocating for migrant children who cross our southern border fleeing horrific violence in their home countries seeking protection, security and opportunities in the United States.

We are part of a church that takes seriously Jesus' words, "Whenever you did it to the least of these, you did it to me." We visit the sick, comfort the grieving, and respond to the needs of the community and the world through things like the Kids Lunch Club, ELCA World Hunger Appeal, and Lutheran Disaster Response. We advocate for and support both private and public funding that provides for the basic needs of food, shelter, medical care, and education for the most vulnerable members of our society.

In our congregation we reflect these priorities in our yearly budgeting – giving generously to the needs of the world. All of this and more are part of who we say Jesus is.

Last week during fellowship I was visiting with a newer member of the congregation, who told me that one of things that attracted him to G.S. was that we live out what it means to follow Jesus. We say clearly who we are and then we do what we say. That is a generous word of encouragement. We know that we do not do this perfectly and that there is always more we can do. But, we keep focused on the mission because we have experienced God's generous welcome and unconditional love, God's forgiveness and new life, and we want others to experience it as well.

Now, because many of us are well, somewhat reserved and not given to drawing attention to ourselves, it could be that naming aloud all of these positive attributes of our congregation makes you uncomfortable. It seems to lack proper humility and slips dangerously close to the sin of pride. But that is only true if we claim the credit for ourselves. Just as Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah was not his own doing, but a gift from God, so too, all that we do is purely by God's blessing and grace. It is the Risen Christ who dwells in our midst, who calls and empowers us to be his body in the world. And so we give thanks and praise to God for the work that we are able to do in Jesus' name. It is the Holy Spirit who gathers us here in this place to feed and nourish us, to form us in true identity as the Body of Christ, and then sends us forth to serve all in Jesus' name.