Sermon for Sunday, August 27, 2023

Who do you say that I am?
Who do YOU say I am?
That is the essential question, isn't it?
Who do I say that Jesus is?

Coming hard on the heels of the story of a Canaanite woman, the least likely of people to affirm Jesus' power, we have this moment of Jesus trying to get a handle on who is understanding what he brings and who doesn't.

So he asks the disciples the question. Who do people say that the Son of Man is? The disciples' responses are plausible ones, that some see Jesus as a prophet in the mold of Elijah or John the Baptist. There are many who preach of reform in the religious system of that day, and there is a long tradition of prophets telling people that they have gotten misdirected in their relationship with God. Plausible, too, for those who have not actually seen Jesus in action, but have heard of him second-hand. News travels fast, even in first century Jerusalem.

He knows what the Pharisees and Sadducees say he is: a troublemaker whose disciples disobey the law. They're not entirely wrong, since he is parsing out for the people what serves God and what serves the powerful. Not surprisingly, the Pharisees and Sadducees are made nervous by him.

He knows what those who have been helped by him say: that he brings divine power to the aid of those who need it. Not mere words, although his words are a comfort and a challenge. Action, when no one acts for hurting people. Exorcising demons. Casting out illness and infirmity. He does what his heart tells him needs to be done, even when it violates purity laws.

He's not surprised by their initial answer. As I said, what they say is consistent with their understanding of their world, and of God.

But he's hoping for something more, it seems. So he turns to the disciples and says "Well, who do YOU say I am?"

You know that moment when the teacher turns to you and asks you a question that may or may not be a trick question, because the teacher doesn't lay all the cards on the table? That moment when you're afraid to answer because you don't want to say the wrong thing?

This is that moment. They saw him deal with grace with the Canaanite woman, lauding her faith – a Canaanite, for heavens sake! – and they've seen him deal with grace with others, even when others didn't return the favor. Still, what DO they actually think? Have they simply followed along because it feels right? Have they become comfortable with traveling with this strange and wonderful man who says such astounding things? Have they thought about it at all?

We don't know how many seconds or minutes or hours pass between the time that Jesus poses the question, but at some point, the one person who can never keep his mouth shut feels the need to say something. So Peter looks at Jesus and says "You're the Messiah, the one we've been waiting for, the one promised in God's Holy Book, the one who is the Son of God."

Does he know what he's saying at that moment? We don't know.

It is, however, a big deal. What Peter is saying is that the prophecy is fulfilled. The need for the synagogue downtown is no longer there, because that's essentially been a holding room for the headliner: the Messiah. If the Messiah is here, it's a whole new show.

Whatever inspired Peter to say this, it is clearly what Jesus wants to hear.

Why?

Because in all the argy-bargy with the religious leaders in the Temple, in all the sneaky trying to trick the new boy in town, none of that crowd seems to get who Jesus is. Who has affirmed Jesus?

Blind people. Crazy people. Lepers. Canaanite mothers. Tax Collectors. Sisters of his friend who died prematurely. Illiterate fishermen…like the disciples all around him now.

Not the religious leaders who are clinging to their power. Certainly not the representatives of the Roman Empire, who will eventually kill him for his words.

Who do YOU say I am?

For each of us, our answer might be different. Perhaps the comforting Good Shepherd in the sparkling robes, with a pristine little lamb around his neck. Perhaps the guy on the Judgment Seat, who will sort us into the "Save" and "Discard" piles at the end of days. Perhaps we're stuck on the image of that little baby Jesus in the manger who cries when we do something wrong, as spoken of by the inimitable Ricky Bobby in the movie Talledega Nights……you know what I'm talking about:

Dear Eight Pound, Six Ounce, Newborn Infant Jesus, don't even know a word yet, just a little infant, so cuddly, but still omnipotent. We just thank you for all the races I've won and the $21.2 million dollars... LOVE THAT MONEY that I have accrued over this past season. Also due to a binding endorsement contract that stipulates I mention PowerAde at each grace, I just wanna say that PowerAde is delicious and it cools you off on a hot summer day and we look forward to PowerAde's release of mystic mountain blueberry. Thank you, for all your power and your grace, Dear Baby God, Amen.'

I don't know if that's the way I'd describe Jesus, but for some of us, that's it. And that's fine. We are creatures of our upbringing and our world, after all.

But knowing that Jesus is fully divine, let's consider the possibility of the fact that he is fully human affects what he is looking for.

He wants to be sure that people are understanding what he's saying and who he is. He's got a job to do and some days it doesn't feel like he's getting any traction.

It reminds me of the anguished mutter of an electrician who was attending to a very badly done temporary fix in our electrical panel: "Why did they do that? I mean, I know why they did that, but why did they do that?"

Can't you just hear Jesus thinking those words on occasion? Especially when he's thinking about something we've done that really didn't align with what we were taught by him?

Remember those words in the Garden of Gethsemane "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Am I right? Sort of fits, doesn't it?

But back to the question at hand:

Who is Jesus to us? Someone we remember on Sunday mornings, and then promptly forget as we start gossiping over lunch? Someone who has a list and is checking it twice to see if we're naughty or nice? (Sidebar: wrong guy. Jesus already knows we're regularly naughty but we can be surprisingly nice more often than we realize.) Someone who is there to comfort us, but – heaven forbid – never challenge us to do hard things.

Jesus is the electrician shaking his head saying we should have done it right the first time. Jesus is also the one who actually fixes the electrical panel, who rescues us at our worst moments, whether or not we are responsible for what has happened. Jesus is the one who is trying to convey as clearly and simply as possible that life is not for gaining wealth and power, it is for helping each other, all the others, regardless of what flavor of God they profess, regardless of whether or not we're comfortable with them, regardless of whether they have a PhD or a GED. Helping each other, not judging each other. And our task is to regularly and humbly check back in with Jesus to say "Am I who you are asking me to be? I know who you are, Jesus. You're the Messiah. I am not. Am I at least on the right track?"

And the follow-on to that task is to not only ask, but to listen for what our hearts tell us. Jesus makes sure we know. We can sense it in our hearts.

Good thing Jesus continues in his mission to help us know exactly who he is and how we can be a part of that mission, if we stay clear on what that mission is. To love each other, without exception. To forgive each other, because we mess up with each other quite often. To work for change, because this troubled world needs a whole lot of change.

Got an idea bout how we can live into this a little bit better? Let's talk. Let's pray. Let's see what we can do to be true followers of Jesus. Not just waving at him with a smile at the altar rail, but doing something that shows we know who he is.

Amen.