

Who Do YOU Say That He Is?

Proper 16, Year A – Matthew 16:13-20

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, August 24, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

“Who do you think you are?” Mr. Perkins, my seventh grade science teacher, was *extremely* fond of asking me that question. It didn't take much, even for my barely adolescent mind, to figure out that this was a *rhetorical* question – that called not so much for an answer, as for *silence*. The question, “Who do you think you are?” was actually the *statement*, “Here's who *I* think you are.” So I stood there with downcast eyes, staring hard at my shoes, hoping that I could somehow keep the stinging in my eyes from spilling out onto my cheeks, as Mr. Perkins proceeded to forcefully give his advice on who I *ought* to be.

As you can probably tell, the episode had at least enough effect on me to carve a niche for itself in my memory. Of course that's partly because the episode was, I regret to say, repeated often throughout my twelfth year. And, to be fair, it wasn't only from Mr. Perkins. Apparently I was a bit loud and impertinent as a twelve-year-old. Go figure. But it also made an impression on me because all of us, not just twelve-year-olds, define much of our identity based on other people's perception of us.

Some commentators think that in our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus is looking for this same type of reflective definition. In asking the question, “Who do people say that I am?” the argument goes, Jesus was engaged in careful self-examination that would eventually lead him to discover his identity and mission as the Son of God. While this argument raises some interesting trains of thought, I suppose, looking at the whole of the Gospel record, I'm afraid I just don't buy it. I think of a twelve-year-old who stood among the teachers at the great Temple and, with his head held high and fire in his eyes, explained to them the teachings of Scripture. I think of the wedding feast at which a young man gave directions that led to the miraculous. I think of a teacher who preached, they say, with power and with authority. Looking at the whole of what we have been told about Jesus, I just think that the one who was and is and is to be, was not letting Mr. Perkins define his identity.

So why *does* Jesus ask? With the certainty and self-assurance with which Jesus was apparently possessed, why did it *matter* what others thought of him? Why did it *matter* who the disciples thought he was? Could it be that the real defining going on in this story has less to do with Jesus and much *more* to do with his followers? Could it be that the personal identities being shaped here are the ones being *asked* the question, “Who do *you* say that I am?”

“Who do you say that I am?” It was an important question for Jesus to ask, because it was such an important question for his disciples to *confront*. With his face set toward Jerusalem, Jesus's disciples needed to be clear about who he was. With his face set toward trial, torment and torture, they needed to be clear about who *they* were. With his face set toward his shameful *death*, they needed to be clear about *whose* they were.

“Who do you say that I am?” It's an important question for *us* to confront, too – for all the same reasons. Because who *we* see Jesus to be, defines our relation to him. And perhaps more *importantly*, who *we* see Jesus to be, defines what we *do* with that relationship.

So, who do *you* say that he is? Do you see Jesus as a great moral teacher, as a preacher who brought the ideals of love for God and for fellow man to life, and who modeled that life of righteousness for us all to follow? *Good*. We are *indeed* to look to Jesus's teaching *and* his life as a template for our own. There is little doubt that this world would be a better place if everyone, at the very least everyone who called themselves a *Christian*, would seek to pattern their life after the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

Who do you say that he is? Do you see Jesus as a worker of wonders, a display of God's power and might? *Good*. If we spent less of our time trying to decide if Christ literally turned water into wine or

if he just shamed the host into bringing out the good stuff, if we spent less of our time arguing about how five loaves and two fishes fed four thousand, or *five* thousand, or five thousand men *plus* women and children, if we spent less time trying to figure out some modern explanation of how a man – no *two* men – could walk on water, we might have more time to accept every day, we might have more time to accept every hour, we might have more time to accept every *moment* of *our* lives as the truly miraculous events they are.

Who do you say that he is? Do you see Jesus as the very epitome of the thundering prophet, declaring the word of God and revealing the will of the Father? *Good*. Never before Jesus, and never since, has there been a clearer statement *or* example of the Kingdom of God. Never before Jesus, and never since, has there been a stronger declaration of God's purpose in forming such creatures as us. Never before Jesus, and never since, has there been a purer manifestation of God's will for you and for me, of God's will for all *creation*. Perhaps if at least we in the Church took the words of the one we *say* we follow more nearly to heart...

Who do *you* say that he is? Do you stop at affirming one or even *all* of these things about Jesus? "He was a good man." "He was a man of power and might." "He was a true messenger from God." Or when the Lord asks of *you*, "Who do *you* say that I am?" can you say with Peter, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God!"

"Who do *you* say that I am?" Jesus asks. Our answer to his question, you see, does absolutely *nothing* to alter the eternally changeless identity of Christ, but it *does* define our *relationship* to him. "Who do you say that I am?" Our answer does *nothing* to diminish the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, but it *does* define what our relationship to him means *to us*. "Who do you say that I am?" Our answer does *nothing* to change the Word who was in the beginning with God, the one through whom all things came to be. But our answer has *everything* to do with what we are going to *do* about it.

Who do you say that he is? Is Christ your savior? Does his mercy and his grace fill you with freedom and with peace, with joy and with *power*? How can you *not* share that glad message with others who still tremble in bondage and despair?

Who do you say that he is? Is Christ your sustainer, the provider of all your needs, the giver of every good gift? Does his goodness provoke in you not just the satisfaction of your hunger, but a profoundly grateful heart? How can you *not* share from your blessings with those who have been given so much less?

Who do you say that he is? Is Christ the lover of your soul, your source of light, your source of life, your source of love? Does his love for you stir within you a fulfilling, consuming love for *him*? How can you not share that love with *everyone* around you?

Who do *you* say that he is? And then, what are *you* going to *do* about it?