

## Who Do We Say He Is?

(Matthew 16:13-20)

Sermon delivered by The Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 27, 2017

In the name of one God – creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

“Do you know me?”

For decades, those four words opened a series of classic American Express commercials. Well-known folks like Mel Blanc, Stephen King and Pél . Lesser-known folks like Francine Neff (yes, I had to look that one up; she served as Treasurer of the United States for several years in the 1970s). Men and women from a variety of backgrounds looked into a camera and touted the merits of having an American Express card. Even if they weren’t immediately recognizable, having the card made sure they would be able to shop and dine at places around the world.

People would not have to ask who they were. Seeing their name stamped on the famous green card was a guarantee that everyone would know.

Today’s Gospel reading could have easily opened with those same four words: do you know me? Here, there was no American Express card; Jesus wanted to know if people knew who he was without the benefit of something specific pointing out his identity. He begins by asking the disciples about the popular consensus. The answers ran the gamut: John the Baptist; Jeremiah; Elijah; one of the prophets. The crowds knew he was someone important – someone worthy enough to be compared by name with those who made up the foundations of their faith and nation. But even at a time when there were cries for the appearance of a messiah, of someone to save the world from its circumstances – to save it from itself – “messiah” incredibly was not one of the answers given.

Then Jesus shifts course, and makes the question an extremely personal one for his disciples. “Who do you say that I am?”

*You, who have walked with me and prayed with me, have heard me preach and watched me perform miracles. You, who have seen the crowds gather around me and clamor for my attention. You, who have seen me walking across the waves and witnessed me calming the storm. Who do you say that I am?*

There’s no break in the narrative. Jesus’ question leads right into an answer. But there had to have been a pause, a period of a few moments perhaps when Jesus looks from one disciple to another, waiting for his question to sink in. He looks them in the eye, waiting to see if there is a moment when all suddenly becomes clear to them - from one, to another, to another. The one who has asked the question patiently waits for the answer.

And then a very surprising thing happens, perhaps the most surprising moment of this entire passage. The surprise is in who sees Jesus for who he truly was. It was Peter. The one who just two chapters earlier failed in his attempt to walk across the water to Jesus because his faith faltered is the same man whose faith allows him to give the answer. In the moment – or even just the instant – after the questions is asked, Peter has the answer. All becomes clear to him.

*You're not simply a prophet. You aren't the reincarnation of John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah.*

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

*Did I get it right?*

"Yes, Peter, you got it right. You have seen who I am - not by simply looking at me with your eyes, but by opening yourself to the Holy Spirit and looking at me from the depths of your soul. You see me for who I truly am."

The question that Jesus has asked the disciples is a question that continues to be asked to this day, to each one of us. Jesus is looking us in the eye, patiently waiting for our answer to his inquiry. "Who do each of you say that I am?" Who do we say that Jesus is?

It's a deeply personal question. If we approach the answer as a community, it is somewhat easier to answer. Jesus is the root of all that brings us to this place. The life of Jesus is what we remember in our worship and our fellowship. The hands of Jesus – the hands touched the faces of the sick and wiped the tears of those who mourned, the hands that broke the bread and were nailed to the cross, the hands that are forever marked with the wounds he accepted on behalf of creation – are the hands that guide us to the Eucharist and lead us through the week. The perfect work of Jesus is what we try – in our own imperfect way – to replicate in our own work in the world.

Individually, the answer is far different – and far more complex. In trying to explain who Jesus is, my words will never be enough, even as the words spoken by Peter were sufficient but nowhere close to enough. For centuries, poets and composers, authors and commentators, have confronted the question of who Jesus is – and no matter how scholarly or deeply or beautifully they may answer, their words and music will never be enough. How does one pin something definite on one who is infinite and beyond definition?

We do what Peter did. We rely on the revelation of the God in heaven. We allow the Holy Spirit to work within us and guide our thoughts and open our eyes. The question will never change, but the more we open ourselves to the many possibilities out there the more we will discover there are many beautiful and appropriate answers.

And when we open ourselves to the many possibilities of who we say Jesus is, the answer we receive will always be the same as that received by Peter:

"Blessed are you!"

Amen.