



FLOSSMOOR COMMUNITY CHURCH

August 21, 2011

“WHAT SAY YOU?”

Matthew 16:13-23

Pastor Fred Lyon

“But who do you say that I am?”

There is a satirical treatment of Jesus asking and Peter responding to this question that was popular back in seminary. Jesus said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God, who is the Alpha and Omega, the Kenosis, our Feeling of Absolute Dependence, our Ultimate Ground of Being.” And Jesus said, “Huh?” Given the doctrinal industry with which Christianity has generated names to describe Jesus these past two thousand years, the question Jesus poses to Peter—But who do you say that I am?—is still ours to grapple with today.

Who we say Jesus is reveals who we are willing to be, and what we are willing to do, for the sake of the reign of God. Amid all the voices raised throughout the centuries, amid all the voices still calling out around us today, Jesus’ question invites us to find our own voice and answer for ourselves.

Toward the close of his classic book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Albert Schweitzer considers the traditional language from the New Testament, which declares that Jesus of Nazareth is Jesus the Christ. Schweitzer points out that this identification of Jesus as the Christ comes to us from the first generation of Christians, that is, the first people ever to grapple with trying to identify, and to put into words, who Jesus is.

These first Christians describe Jesus “as Messiah, Son of Man, Son of God.” Such traditional titles have become central to our understanding of Jesus. But Schweitzer wonders if this Christ language about Jesus has become too traditional—too stuck in time, too stuck in centuries of a kind of lockstep familiarity—to still be fresh and relevant.

Schweitzer does not reject the traditional Christ language about Jesus. Instead, he wants us to be mindful that the primary source of our traditional Christ language about Jesus in the New Testament comes from a particular generation of ordinary people doing their faithful best to answer the extraordinary question Jesus asks Peter, “But who do you say that I am?” Thus, Schweitzer proposes that in every generation, people in general and Christians in particular have to decide anew—for themselves—what to do about who Jesus is. All—you and I included—must decide anew how to answer Jesus’ question, “But who do you say that I am?”

In the famous concluding observation of his book, Schweitzer has this to say about Jesus. He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, he came to those...who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is.

Who do we say that Jesus is for our time, and from our experience, using language that is relevant in 2011?

What do we really mean, what are we really saying when we call Jesus—Christ, Messiah, Lord, Son of Man, Son of God? How do we explain Jesus, how do we exemplify Jesus, how do we enact the compassionate love and loving

compassion of Jesus in ways that are so full of life that they transform the hearts and minds of men, women, and children in 2011?

Is Jesus risen from the dead the source and ground of our life, personally and as the body of Christ in the world? If so, then who are we because of who Jesus is? What is the significance of our lives because of who Jesus is? How do we live our lives because of who Jesus is?

To answer this barrage of questions, let us return to Jesus' original question at Caesarea Philippi and Peter's response to it. Particularly worth noting is the wording of the question itself. Most translations read: "But who do you say that I am?" However, the exact original wording is much more direct and penetrating. The question literally reads: "But you—who do you say that I am?" More colloquially, the question could go something like this: "But what say you? Who do you say that I am?"

Identifying Jesus is not just business---it's personal. You can, and should, learn as much as possible about Jesus. Yet at the same time, after all the studying, after reading and listening to what all sorts of other people have to say about Jesus, it eventually comes down to what you have to say about Jesus. Not what your friends say, not what your Mama or Daddy says, not what your favorite teacher or theologian or writer says, not even what the Church says. Eventually it comes down to "What say you---who do you say that Jesus is?"

And so, what does the 'Christ' in Christian mean to you? What Lord comes to mind when you pray the Lord's Prayer? What understanding do you have of Jesus from the Bible and the historic teachings of the Church? Who do you remember whenever you hear the words, "Do this in remembrance of me?" How do you convey to others who Jesus is in what you think, say, and do? For that matter, how do you think, speak, and act because of who Jesus is in your life?

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I ask all these questions because of something that occurred to me on the last day of vacation Bible school a few summers ago when one seven-year-old could be heard saying to a friend: "It's Jesus this, and Jesus that---all they ever talk about around here is Jesus." There are times when some folks repeat Jesus' name so often it actually sounds more like a kind of totem or magic spell that has absolutely nothing to do with who the risen Christ calls us to be, absolutely nothing to do with what the risen Christ calls us to do. One can unwittingly take the Lord's name in vain whenever, even with the best intentions, one repeats the Lord's name into meaninglessness. Indeed, all of us take the Lord's name in vain whenever we talk about Jesus, even with the best intentions, but cannot give the simplest personal explanation—not some tidy dogmatic formula, but a personal explanation—of who Jesus is.

Worse, still, is when, like Peter, we resist how Jesus identifies himself on his own terms. Peter does not want a Christ who will face suffering. But Jesus makes it clear that his identity has nothing to do with suiting Peter's expectations. Who Jesus is likewise has nothing to do with suiting our expectations.

Who Jesus is has to do with God's expectations.

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What say you?

Perhaps a closer look at Schweitzer's words can lead to further questions that point us toward, if not answers, then, at least some helpful clues for understanding who Jesus is in our personal lives and as a community of faith.

- "[Jesus] speaks to us the same word: 'Follow thou me!' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time...." To what tasks in our time is Jesus calling you and me?
- "[Jesus] commands. And to those who obey, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in his fellowship..." How has Jesus comforted you and me in times of trial and given us the strength to move out of our comfortable zones to reach out with courage to comfort others who are in dire need of good news?
- "...and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is...." What have you and

I learned about Jesus through our own personal experience, and are we willing to share that experience in a manner that reveals we are not ashamed of the gospel?

More than good questions, I hope these are grace-filled questions that prompt us to explore who this risen One is, the living Christ who forever “speaks to us the same word: ‘Follow thou me!’ and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time.”

Our time—what say you and I about Jesus for our time? What say you and I about Jesus amid all that is happening right now in the eternal design of God’s sacred purposes—sacred purposes to which Jesus calls us every minute of every day of our lives?

May we use our time well.