

9.15.2024 Pentecost 17

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Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 116:1-9; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

“Who do you say that I am?”

Grace to you, and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

At the center of today’s gospel is Jesus’ question, “*Who do you say that I am?*” It is a question always new; it is a question for each of us. Answering this question means embarking upon a lifetime journey with Jesus.

Jesus knew what he was doing. Like any good teacher, he was asking questions and getting his disciples to begin thinking about themselves and the world. Jesus began with an easy question, “Who do people say that I am?” The disciples eagerly replied, “*John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.*” People were talking about Jesus and the disciples reported on what they had heard about him.

People today continue to see admirable qualities in Jesus. Some say he is a friend, a guide, and a coach; others say he is an idealist, a moral teacher, and a prophetic voice; still others call Jesus a charismatic social reformer and a visionary leader. These are all fine answers, but such accolades are still simply reports about Jesus.

However, Jesus’ question, “*But who do you say that I am?*” is like a moment in school when the teacher asks a student to go to the blackboard and demonstrate their answer. Singled out from the rest of the class, the student must demonstrate how they arrived at the answer. We can no longer simply report a general answer, we must demonstrate our answer to him.

Peter’s reply, “*You are the Messiah,*” was an incredible answer to the question because Jesus had never said he was the Messiah. Jesus had called himself the “*Son of man,*” but never the Messiah. Peter saw something in Jesus that no one else had yet dared to say.

Yet very quickly it became apparent that Peter was using the word “Messiah” differently than Jesus had been demonstrating it in his ministry. When Jesus began to teach them that the Son of man would undergo great suffering, be rejected, die, and be raised, Peter in no uncertain terms rebuked Jesus. The Messiah that Peter and so many others were hoping for was supposed to be a political king who would rule Israel and would forcefully expel Roman occupation. Peter was saying, “No, Jesus, you will become the great and promised political ruler we have needed and wanted.” Peter’s messianic ideal was a theocracy, a blend of human and divine worldly power. So Jesus rebuked Peter, saying, “*Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on*

divine things but on human things.”

People today continue to pay lip service to a God who will make the world right, while continuing to oppress, hate, and kill our neighbor. We want a God who will do great things among the nations, solving all our problems, and at the same time we continue to judge others in God’s name. Like Peter, we want a God we can control.

Jesus then called the crowd with his disciples, saying, *“If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”* Deny, cross, and follow – three of the hardest words Jesus ever spoke, and they are words we don’t really want to hear. We want a God who will bring peace, prosperity, and acceptance to us and the select few we choose, while judging those whom we have decided to exclude. These three words are words of grace.

“Deny yourself.” 2,000 years later, Jesus’ words continue to define Christian discipleship. We cannot follow him unless we deny ourselves. We each understand ourselves in different ways: through vocation and family, degrees and awards, wealth and privilege, ethnicity and nationality. In asking us to deny ourselves, Jesus is asking us to risk letting go in order that we might rediscover ourselves living within his grace. To deny oneself is to “forsake the self,” to abandon or discard that self we have made. The hidden question Jesus is asking is, “Who do you say that you are?” In denying oneself and leaving the false self behind, we will discover our true selves as disciples.

“Take up your cross.” No one can become a “new creation” in Christ without the cross. Notice the words *“your cross,”* meaning that each of us has been given a cross to carry. This cross is the work Christ has given to you to accomplish during your life. What is the cross Jesus has given to you? Obedience to this cross puts to death all the compromises and agreements we make with the world, so that freed, we might live in the world for others. Yet like Peter, we don’t want anything to change. We say, “Jesus, don’t be so extreme, don’t be so fanatical. Be practical. The world requires compromise. In politics and economics, in work and society, we must all compromise.” We continue to rebuke Jesus with our actions, and Jesus continues to ask each of us, *“Who do you say that I am?”*

“And follow me.” To follow Jesus means staying close to him. It means, daily, relying on his grace. Following Jesus becomes easier the more we seek fellowship with him. Yet this is hard. Our culture loudly proclaims, “I did it my way,” tempting us to walk alone in the wilderness. Our culture tells us not to be “a follower,” and so we have difficulty following Jesus. Though

we pray, “*thy will be done,*” we also praise so-called mavericks and strong-willed leaders who follow only their will to power. Following Jesus means seeking his will alone, allowing his will to rule in our hearts.

Daily, Christ calls us to die to the world along with its constant demands to love only some, while hating and rejecting others. Daily, Christ calls to die to ourselves and our personal hatreds of certain ethnicities and nationalities, of certain understandings of gender and identity, and of our exclusion of certain groups and people. How easily we say words of rejection rather than inclusion; how easily we hate rather than love. Like today’s reading from James, “*the tongue is a fire,*” how quick we are to speak words of judgement and hatred for others, rather than words of welcome and love.

Yet Isaiah writes, “*It is the Lord who helps me*” (Is. 50:9), encouraging us to turn again to Jesus. In the greatness of God’s love for this world, Jesus was lifted onto the cross for all people. He demonstrated his love for you, your neighbor, and for your enemy. Jesus’ cross reveals the Messiah’s love for all people that overcomes the world’s hatred and division.

“*For what can a person give in return for their life?*” It is in self-denial and the cross that others will see God in you. As Jesus gave himself for the world, give yourself for others.

In doing so, you will demonstrate your answer to his question: “*Who do you say that I am?*”
Amen.