

Matthew 16:13-20  
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"Who do you say that I am?"

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Romans 12:1-8

1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. 3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, 5 so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. 6 We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; 7 ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; 8 the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Matthew 16:13-20

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." 20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Jesus asked the disciples "Who do YOU say that I am?"

All three synoptic gospels recount this pivotal moment, and our lectionary includes it every year. That's a good thing. Because that IS the question for all of Jesus' followers. For me, the answer keeps evolving.

In high school I probably said, "Jesus is my Lord and Savior." I was always at church then, always at Youth Group. And I was in an Episcopal sorority at St. John the Divine, across the street from my public school. We had Eucharist and breakfast on Tuesday morning and met on Wednesday after school. St. John the Divine was and is on the evangelical, charismatic end of Episcopal practice. There, for the first and only time, I regularly heard Episcopalians "witness" to their faith.

"Who do YOU say that I am?" After high school, nobody asked me the question.

Not at Rice University; I had joined the legions of the lapsed.

Not in the art-world—not mine, at least; faith wasn't valued.

Professionally, I was a proud citizen of the world. But If I ever thought about faith--and I tried not to--I felt alienated, a person without a homeland. I

recognized the blessing of faith in old friends--and had a quiet longing for it. But it seemed as remote to me as life on the planet Mars.

"Who do YOU say that I am?"

Nobody asked me that question in my discernment process for the Episcopal priesthood. Nor in my admission to Episcopal seminary twenty years ago.

If they had, I would have shame-facedly replied "I don't know".

A new reconvert after 25 years away, I was ignorant about the Bible, about theology. And ignorance was embarrassing to this PhD, "scholar" in art history.

I had no idea how essential and comforting "unknowing" actually is.

God is merciful, and I was spared the question for a long time.

So was Peter. Peter, the first disciple Jesus called, had seen countless healing miracles. At Jesus' command Peter had walked on water and been empowered to heal and cast out demons himself. Peter had seen Jesus still the stormy sea, and feed thousands from crumbs.

Peter had heard **others** call Jesus "Son of God" including: lepers, Gentiles, the demon-possessed, and even the demons. But Peter was months into their journey together before he got the question.

It was the right time. And a well-chosen locale. Caesarea Philippi--a new Roman city in the far north, near the headwaters of the Jordan River--was best known for the Temple honoring Emperor Augustus that Herod the Great had built there.

Matthew's audience would have gotten the irony: in Caesarea Philippi, Augustus was worshipped as a god. Augustus had been called Son of God in his own lifetime. Now, in the shadow of Augustus' temple, Peter proclaimed **Jesus** as the Son of the true God, God of the true Kingdom.

Peter was transformed, his own identity shifted. No matter what other people said about Jesus, Peter now knew for himself that Jesus was the Messiah, God's anointed, God's Son. In that moment he made a commitment of heart and soul.

And that's what Jesus was looking for. Because God in Christ had work for Peter to do—the kind of work that only **that** depth of commitment could bear.

In return, Jesus blessed Peter and honored him, foretelling the role that Peter would play in the church after Jesus' death. Peter still had to grow into that role, and would stumble along the way, as we know.

But the die was cast. In saying who Jesus was to him, Peter redefined himself. Peter was "transformed by the renewing of [his] mind"--as Paul wrote to the Romans.

Transformation, renewal, commitment: that's what Jesus wants from us, as well. Because God in Christ has work for each of **us** to do.

Who do I say that Jesus is today? Titles like King, or even Messiah don't do it. Metaphor is better: words that convey relationship—like savior (one who heals), or shepherd (one who tends, guards, leads, protects). But no words can ever contain the mystery of God in Christ. I've become truly content with a deep **unknowing**.

Images are good. They're more expansive. Take the medieval mosaic at S. Clemente in Rome. At the center of a shimmering golden field that fills the apse, Jesus stands on a simple cross, flanked by Mary and John. The cross is covered with white doves, and from its base springs a *rinceau*, the classical curved vine motif that flows out everywhere in an orderly fashion. Within the perfect spirals of the *rinceau* are birds, animals, and people that represent the whole of creation and society: peasants and lords, monks and nuns, shepherds, scribes, gardeners at work. All of life, all of labor, all the world is symbolized there, floating in a golden cloud, in the blessed embrace of the love that flows from the cross.

But I really know best who Jesus is when I feel called to be Jesus' voice and hands and feet, when I'm moved act, to write, to speak for justice as Jesus did.

That's the way I feel about racial inequity.

The shocking events in Charlottesville brought to light the wretched, malignant white-supremacist subculture that we hoped was a thing of the past. We must face the ugly American truth about racism in our communities and in ourselves, and we must work to change it. It is long overdue.

Those of us from the South now understand that moldy monuments to a war long past can still nurture present-day racist agendas. They are coming down, as well they should.

Removing public monuments is relatively simple. It's seductively satisfying. And targeting the South is a comfortable, well-worn path whose danger is that it can let the rest of the country dodge its own racism—past and present.

It's time to face the truth, wherever we live. Minnesota (and other states) used a policy called red-lining systematically to prevent African Americans from getting mortgages. If you don't know about it, look it up! Denied and deprived of the chance to build wealth through home ownership, our Northside neighbors were condemned to generational poverty. The tragic legacy of that discrimination, in the words of our friend Pastor Alika Galloway, "our children can't read; our children are hungry".

Systemic racism has made this state a model of racial **inequity**. According to a study by 24/7 Wall Street, nationwide we're second only to Wisconsin in this shame, followed by our neighbors: South Dakota, Illinois and Iowa. If you missed the report on WCCO the morning of August 22, check it out.

The study's criteria are clear: measurable gaps between black and white in unemployment, income, education, and home ownership. Staggeringly, here African Americans are **ten times** more likely to be jailed or imprisoned than white people.

Who do YOU say that Jesus is? Each of us will have our own answer. You may find words or images that fit. But with St. Paul, I believe that we know best when—like Jesus, like Peter, like Paul--we live into our own vocation. That's when we recognize God's call to use our particular gifts for the common good. I know that many of you already do so in your jobs and in your volunteer work.

You may be called to teach, to give, to lead, to encourage, to a life of prayer or to public service, to presence, to pastoral ministry or to hands-on work.

Whatever your vocation, it is a call to joy and fulfillment. For, as Frederick Buechner wrote, "Vocation is the place where [y]our deep gladness meets the world's deep need."