“Who Do *You* Say That I Am?”

Matthew 16:13-20

1 Peter 2:4-10

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My group of friends in college was largely unchurched. There were many things that bonded our group together -- early 2000s rap, marching band, flag football, and breakfast night in the cafeteria -- but none of those things that we shared was a life of faith. I was an anomaly in my group -- spending Saturday nights hanging out with them and then getting up early on Sunday mornings to drive down the mountain to attend worship with my grandfather at the little church that had baptized me twenty years earlier.

As a result of my other-ness, I spent many a Saturday evening on freezing cold balconies, the target of a litany of questions about my faith. “So, do you really believe that Jesus was the Son of God?” “Do you really believe the world was created in a week?”  “If God is so good, why does evil exist?” “How can you possibly believe all of this??”

The questions that my friends peppered me with weren’t asked in an antagonistic way. They were genuinely curious.  Some questions came from friends who had zero church background at all and some came from friends who had been deeply hurt by their churches back home and some came from perfect strangers who couldn’t help but overhear our conversations.

The thing about those cold Boone nights is that they helped me to solidify what I believed. It was a new role for me, a child of the church, to have to articulate my faith and what I believe and why I believe it to people who had very little knowledge of the Bible, Jesus, and God. I couldn’t just bring my friend asking the hard questions to church and have them listen to the minister there to get the answers to their questions. They probably wouldn’t have gone if I had invited them. Instead, I had to come up with answers right then and there.

Sometimes when we are forced to articulate our faith, it not only helps those with whom we are speaking, it helps us to better understand what it is we really do believe.

Perhaps that’s what Jesus was up to when he questioned the disciples that day in Caesarea Philippi. They’d been following him around for a while now, witnessing all the miracles and clashes with temple authorities.  Time to see what they’ve learned.  What *do* they believe?

Jesus starts by giving them a softball question -- who do people say that the Son of Man is? The disciples respond by listing what they’ve heard -- Jesus is actually John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the other prophets. That’s what the people are saying.

Why do they mention these names specifically?  The disciples answer according to whichever particular faction they were a part of.  One commentary says it would be akin to someone in the Protestant church today to interpret Jesus “through the lens of Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Darby, Barth, Aimee Semple McPherson, or Billy Graham. The tendency,” the commentary writer notes, “is for people to project onto Jesus their particular cultural, theological, and denominational allegiances.”

But Jesus doesn’t let them get away with this. He turns the attention away from what “others” are saying back to the disciples. “But who do *you* say that I am?”

This is a moment of vulnerability for Jesus. Do his friends \*get\* him? Do they fully understand who he is? Are they fully on board with his mission and ministry?  Do they totally understand what it means for Jesus to be the Messiah and what it might mean for the ones who follow him?

You can imagine that where the disciples were jumping over each other to answer his first question and name who *other* people were saying Jesus was, now, there’s an awkward silence. Who will be the first to answer? Who will be the first to take a chance of getting the answer wrong?

As always, it’s Simon Peter who is brave enough to step forward.  “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

Jesus responds in a way that seems very emotional by Jesus’s standards: “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!” There were no exclamation points when the Greek New Testament was written, but our English translators felt it necessary to add one here. Jesus is excited! Peter’s *got* it.

And because of his faith statement, Jesus proclaims that he will build his church upon Peter’s faith.  Not upon Peter, mind you, but his faith. The community that will come together following Jesus’s death and resurrection will be built upon the statement that all who are a part of it proclaim that Christ, the anointed one, is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

Well done, Peter. He’s figured out all the mysteries of the Messiah. Or has he?

Commentary writer Debie Thomas suggests that this first statement by Peter is really just the beginning of his faith journey. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God” is just the first statement of the many truths about Christ that Peter will discover throughout his life, both while Jesus is alive and later on after Peter is left to begin this new church.

Debie Thomas posits that after this first statement by Peter, he continues to develop his own Christology -- his understanding of who Christ is for Peter and for the world.  She writes, “When I think about the whole of Peter’s story — all the biographical details that we 21st century Christians have the privilege to know and ponder — I’m stunned by the answers that Peter must have lived into as time went on — answers he never could have articulated in the early years of discipleship.  “Who do you say that I am?”  You are the one who found me in a fishing boat and gave me a new vocation.  You’re the one who healed my mother-in-law.  You’re the one who said, “Yes, walk on water."  You’re the one who caught me before I drowned.  You’re the one who glowed on a mountaintop while I babbled nonsense.  You’re the one who washed my feet while I squirmed in shame.  You’re the one who told me — accurately — that I’d be a coward on the very night you needed me to be brave.  You’re the one I denied three times to save my skin.  You’re the one who looked into my eyes with pain and pity when the cock crowed.  You’re the one who fed me breakfast on a beach and spoke love and fresh purpose into my humiliation.  You’re the one who gave me the courage to preach to three thousand people on Pentecost.  You’re the one who taught me that I must not call unclean what you have pronounced clean.  You are the one who stayed by my side through insults, beatings, and imprisonments.  You are the one I followed into martyrdom.  You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Peter’s statement in today’s text is just one of many important steps along his faith journey. Jesus praises him extensively, but just a few verses later, Peter will protest when Jesus begins to explain to the disciples what must happen -- how he will suffer, be killed, and be raised three days later. Peter protests so strongly that Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan!” It’s always two steps forward and one step back with Peter.

But at no point does Jesus give up on Peter. Jesus knows this is an incredibly hard journey that he has asked Peter to join him on. He knows it’s a process with setbacks along the way.  But the important thing is, Peter continues along the way, learning more and more what it means to be a part of the Jesus movement. Peter’s statement in today’s text is just a step in his journey, one step of many.

I want to revisit those nights in Boone in college and tell you that my answers to those faith questions weren’t always the most theologically articulate. I often struggled to accurately cite the Bible verses that backed up my thoughts. When the words wouldn’t come, I frequently wanted to answer with an exasperated, “I don’t know! Because I just do!”

I’m sure my friends rarely walked away feeling that they had all of the theological answers they sought and were ready to join the church that night. I say this because I’m wondering if some of you hearing me talk about my time in college are saying something like, “Well, yeah...of course Sarah was willing *and could* talk about her faith. After all, *she* became a minister!”

It can be hard for *anyone* to articulate their faith. For those of you who are elders in this congregation who have taken elder training with John, you’ve had to articulate your faith in the form of a faith statement. It’s often one of the hardest aspects of your elder training. You’re putting yourself in a vulnerable position to have to write down just what it is that you believe. But my hunch is that most of you who have gone through that process wouldn’t trade it for the world. It was worth the agonizing over every word, the poring over your Bible for Scripture that has guided you throughout your life.

Similarly, every minister in our denomination has to write a faith statement as a part of our pastor information form which is a pastor nominating committee’s first glimpse into a prospective pastor’s beliefs.  It’s a pretty vulnerable document to craft, but it’s important for churches and pastors to be on the same page belief-wise. Hard as it is to write, it’s one of the most important elements of our application process.  But I know some ministers who go back and revisit their faith statement every year on the anniversary of their installation at their current church. They set time aside to read what they have written and see how their faith has changed throughout the past year because they know faith is dynamic, not static. It changes in unexpected ways as we encounter the challenges of life.

So who do *you* say that Jesus is? No matter how you answer that question today, I hope you know that your answer right now isn’t your final answer. This isn’t Who Wants to be a Millionaire. You don’t have to lock it in. Your answer will change throughout your life. Sometimes it will be crystal clear who Jesus is. And sometimes it won’t be. Sometimes every word of the Apostles' Creed or the Heidelberg Catechism will ring true, and sometimes you might doubt portions of it. THAT’S. OKAY.

But if Jesus still built his church upon Peter, the guy who will mess up three verses later and question just what exactly it would mean to be Messiah, Peter, who denied Christ 3 times during the night of Jesus’s arrest and trial, if Jesus still built his church upon Peter, after the many ways in which Peter had failed to live into his early faith statement, Jesus can still use you and me, all of us, to continue to build his church upon our faith.

So, who do *you* say Jesus is?