

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 24, 2014

“Who Do You Say That I Am?”

Matthew 16:13-20

Have you noticed there are all kinds of questions? There are silly questions and there are great questions. There was a comedian who was riding a subway into work. He had finished reading the morning paper and was saving it to bring it to his friends at work. “How do you save a newspaper on the subway?” he asks. You sit on it.

A new commuter came on the subway, saw the newspaper that the comedian was sitting on and asked, “Are you reading that paper?” The comedian stood up, turned the page, sat down on the paper again and answered, “Yes.”

That was a silly question...

Jesus and his disciples were in the region of Caesarea Philippi. Jesus turned to his disciples and asked, “What do people say the Son of Man is?” That was a great question...

I say this is a great question because this really is the defining question of life: what do you believe about Jesus? Think about it for a moment. To a certain extent, this question will determine your values, many of your attitudes and your general orientation toward life. If you believe Jesus was simply a great teacher like Buddha or Confucius...or simply the leader of one of the world’s great religions like Mohammed...or even a fascinating historical figure like Mahatma Gandhi that is one thing. But if you believe that Jesus is who he said he is, the Son of God, that is quite another situation. If he is the Son of God then he has a claim on our lives. It is fascinating to learn what people were saying about Jesus. His disciples replied, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” People were saying that Jesus was John the Baptist. Evidence of this perception is found in Mark 6. John the Baptist was dead by this time. So many people were asserting that Jesus was John come back from the dead. Whatever the explanation, the disciples said that some of the people were saying that Jesus was John the Baptist.

Others suggested that he was Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the prophets. For centuries, the Jews believed that Elijah would return before the beginning of the Messianic age, so when Jesus came preaching the Kingdom of God, this seemed like a logical assumption. Jeremiah fit into this time frame and that’s why he was a part of the conversation. The people were wrong in what they were saying about him, but it is evident that Jesus had captured their attention.

Then Jesus zeroed in on the heart of this question. He turned to his disciples and asked, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” That’s the question that matters, isn’t it? Who is Jesus to you?

I am sure some of you may remember a country singer named Waylon Jennings. He had several hit tunes beginning in the 1970s. Author Will Campbell traveled for a while with Waylon Jennings on tour, and served, unofficially, as Waylon’s pastor. You need to know, if you don’t already, that Jennings had lived a rough life.

One day Campbell decided to talk to Waylon about his spiritual condition. Will asked Waylon, “Waylon, what do you believe about Jesus?” Waylon simply said, “Uh-huh.” That was the extent of his reply. A few weeks later, Will asked again, “Waylon, what do you believe about Jesus?” Again Waylon said, “Uh-huh.” A few weeks later Will tried a third time, “Waylon, what do you believe about Jesus?” Waylon finally answered. He turned to Will and said, “Well, let me ask you all of the books that have been written about Jesus have they ever improved on Him?” Will said, “No.” Jennings said, “Well, then that’s what I believe. I believe in Jesus.”

Waylon Jennings wasn't too articulate about his faith, but he knew that Jesus was like no other man who ever lived. In his words, no one's ever improved on Jesus. Every person in this room will agree with that statement.

It was, of course, Simon Peter who answered Christ's question. Simon Peter got a lot of things wrong when he blurted out answers to Jesus' questions, but this time he was exactly on target: "You are the Messiah," he said, "the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven."

Pardon me for putting you on the spot, but how would you answer that same question? Let me say once again, this is the most important question in life, because how you answer this question will determine, to a great extent, how you will live your life.

There are many people who say they are Christians, but they live as functional atheists. That is, many of these people will state that Jesus is the Son of God, but their lives say something else. Why do I call them atheists? It is because God plays no real part in how they live their lives, how they make their decisions. Many of these people are part of a church. They mouth the creeds each week. They sing lofty hymns. They might even read Scripture from time to time. But when they read Scripture, the words of Jesus are no more to them than mere words of advice which they may accept or reject as their own selfish desires may dictate. They may kneel beside their beds for prayer each night, but their prayers are no more than solicitations for God to do their bidding. "Heal my body, Lord, take care of my children, help my stocks do well. Amen"

They never examine their souls. Their prayer is not that they be conformed to God's will, but that God will conform to their will. They will never sweat great drops of blood as Jesus did in Gethsemane praying, "Not my will, but thine be done," because it has never occurred to them that there could be a difference between God's will and their own. Am I being overly harsh with those who live such lives? Or am I being honest about how many of us in actuality conduct our lives?

I doubt that few of us were surprised last fall when the Oxford English dictionary named "selfie" the word of the year for 2013. What is a "selfie?" For anyone who does not know by now, it is a picture that you take of yourself in order to upload it to Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat or any other social networking site. We have become a society of people who take pictures of themselves.

What does it mean to say that Jesus Christ is the Messiah the Son of the living God? What does it mean to say that Jesus Christ is Lord? It means that we bow before HIM and not ourselves. It means that it is more important to live our lives in our faith in Jesus Christ than to be self-absorbed and flaunt our selfies. It is in Christ to whom we look daily for guidance not to our own desires or to the desires of those about us. To say that Jesus Christ is Lord of our lives is to acknowledge that we have become a part of Christ's family and that makes all the difference in how we live.

Ask yourself whether it is making any real difference in your life that you are part of God's family? Does it make you more loving, more tolerant, more disciplined, more moral, more purposeful? If you can't answer yes to these questions, then the question has to be asked, have you made Jesus Christ the Lord of your life? Or are you living as a functional atheist, in spite of the fact that you have made a public confession to Christ?

It's not easy. It takes a conscious act of will to say, "From this day forward by the grace of God I'm going to live as the person that Jesus Christ has called me to be." It is not easy, but it is the surest way to find peace in your life.

Who do you say that Christ is? Don't answer off of the top of your head. Look deep into your heart. Is he the Messiah, the Son of the living God? Is he the Lord of your life?