

Who Do You Say That I Am
Sunday September 13, 2009
Mark 8:27 – 38 (NIV)

Peter's Confession of Christ

²⁷Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

²⁸They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

²⁹"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Peter answered, "You are the Christ."

³⁰Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

Jesus Predicts His Death

³¹He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³²He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

³³But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

³⁴Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. ³⁶What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? ³⁷Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul? ³⁸If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels."

This is the Word of God and It Can be Trusted . . . Thanks be to God.

Today's scripture reading tells us that Jesus and His disciples are headed toward to villages of Caesarea Philippi and along the way He takes an opportunity to teach them and to quiz them about what they have learned. We've seen this sort of teaching with Jesus and His followers before; when we read about their journey from the upper room to the Garden at Gethsemane when Jesus said to them, "I am the vine and you are the branches. . ." I believe this method of teaching is referred to as the Socratic Method. Nevertheless, here, as they are *on their way*, Jesus does not offer them instruction as to Who He is, but rather asks them what the people they have encountered have said about Him and in turn inquires as to how this has affected their view of Him. "Who do people say that I am?" He asks, "Who do *you* say that I am?"

As many of you know, I have a twin brother. During my mother's pregnancy she and the doctors were unaware there were two us because our heart beats were synchronized, that is they beat at the same time. The only comment the doctor ever had to say about what he heard when he listened to what he thought was a single baby's heartbeat was, "the baby has a strong heartbeat." On the day we were born, the hospital prepared diligently for the arrival of my mother's fourth child. Well imagine the excitement and disbelief that soon followed my brother's birth when the doctor realized there was a second child. And so my mother delivered not her fourth child on that day, but her fourth AND fifth. Because they had only

prepared for one birth, I, being the second to be born, went three days without a name.

Names are important, especially for twins. Naming one child is hard enough, but to name two so as to honor them equally, that must be tormenting. On the flip side, however, name combinations have been known to be disastrously too creative or too cute; like Taylor and Tyler, Xernona and Xernena or Tim and Kim. I think my mother did well with Timothy and Anthony, of course I am a little biased in this discussion.

My birth name is Anthony David, I grew up Anthony and have been referred to as so by most. However, you always have those around you who want to be different or creative, be it a sign of their affection or their need to torment. Other names that I have been called include, Tony, Andy, Antny, Ant Ant, Antoine, David, Coley, Mr. Coley, honey, pumpkin, boo, son, dad, teacher, pastor and a slew of other choice names I am sure need not repeating in the God's house. In my research I have discovered that Anthony means *Worthy of Praise*, Tony means *marked by elegance*, David means *beloved*, and Ant Ant means your name is too difficult for a child to pronounce when they are first learning to speak. I suppose if I obsessed long enough, I could learn a lot about what people think of me by the name they call me.

This is the question that Jesus was asking His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Now the disciples had a lot to choose from. We've been

studying advent with our Tuesday night group and in a piece of scripture we often hear during Advent, Isaiah 9:6, we read "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." So the disciples had at least four names to choose from. They could have called him Immanuel, Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus, son of Joseph, or son of Mary. They could have gone with Son of Man, the gate, the bread of life, Alpha and Omega, the Great High Priest, Last Adam, the Lamb of God, or just Lamb. Just exactly how many names did they have to choose from? There is no exact science to it, but evangelist Billy Sunday, says "There are two hundred and fifty-six names given in the Bible for the Lord Jesus Christ, and I suppose this was because he was infinitely beyond all that any one name could express." We can refer to Jesus by 256 different names (that's 2^8 for you math nerds, like me, out there).

Peter gives the right answer to Jesus' question, "You are the Christ," but how do we answer that question today? Many people have huge opinions on who Jesus was and is. I know this might come as a shock to you but not all people, even all religions see Jesus the same way. If you are an atheist than you probably see Jesus as a historical figure whose followers made wild claims. He was a good teacher, had good morals, but that is it. If you are Jewish you would say that Jesus was not the Messiah. He is not the Messiah because the time was not right for the Messiah to come

according to the Hebrew Bible. If you are Islamic then you see Jesus as one of the Major Prophets God sent to the world but not God. You would believe that Jesus was not killed or crucified and, interestingly enough, that he didn't drink wine. Scientologist, yes like Tom Cruise, state that Jesus is classified below the level of Operating Thetan but a shade above the Scientology state of 'clear.' (It's ok, I don't really understand that one myself.) If you are a child you might see Jesus as another Santa Clause. You talk to him and he gives you stuff.

C. S. Lewis in his book, Mere Christianity, says, "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher; He would either be a lunatic - on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg - or he would be the devil of hell. You must take your choice. Either [Jesus] was, and is, the Son of God, or else He [was] a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us."

How we view Jesus, either culturally or as individuals speaks volumes to not only our perception of Christianity or of Church, but to our own understanding of what being in relationship with Christ is all about. If Jesus stood in front of you today and asked you, "Who do you say I am," how

would you answer that question? How you answer that question says a lot about the state of your faith and soul.

Peter, in his uncanny ability to accentuate the obvious, has declared that Jesus is the Christ; the Messiah. Do we have that same realization today? Do we, like Peter, see what is so obviously apparent about Jesus, or do we perceive Him through clouded eyes? Who is Jesus Christ? In infancy, He startled a king. As a boy, He stunned temple leaders and theologians with His knowledge and wisdom, for His knowledge was directly from God. In manhood, He ruled the elements and quieted the raging sea. He healed without medicine, and fed thousands from a boy's lunch. Even demons obeyed Him and He gave back life to those who were dead. Yet He suffered and sustained in body and soul the anger of God against the sin of the whole human race. He was despised and rejected of men. Though He was innocent, He was condemned by a civil judge and sentenced to death on a cross.

Close your eyes for a moment and picture Jesus in your mind. What do you see? What color is His hair; His Eyes? How tall is He? What color is His skin? During Holy Week of 2001, the Discovery Channel and the BBC coproduced a television documentary titled, *Jesus: The Complete Story*. It was reported during the documentary that scientist had attempted to re-create Jesus' physical appearance; using modern forensic technology and a 2,000 years old Jewish skull. The final image revealed an olive-skinned man

with short dark curly hair. Their image of Jesus challenged our Eurocentric view of Christ; a “blue-eyed, blond-haired Jesus popularized on stained-glass windows and portraits.” (De La Torre, 2002)

Now, the image discrepancies themselves that exist between our physical image of Christ and that of the documentary are really not that important. What is important, however, is our reaction to that discrepancy. How did you feel when I described the documentary’s claim concerning Jesus’ possible physical appearance? Were you shocked, disappointed, curious, and/or and angry? Consider the following reactionary example. In Miquel De la Torre’s book, “Reading the Bible from the Margins,” Miquel recounts an article written by Kathleen Parker shortly after the documentary aired. The title of her article read, “Jesus Falls Victim to Makeover Madness.” She goes on to write, “The willowy, long-haired figure who in picture books attracted children . . . now looks like the kind of guy who wouldn’t make it through airport security.” In essence, she voices in her anger that the white Jesus she grew up with is being replaced by an ethnic-looking Jesus, a Jesus who looks more like someone from the margins of society, that is, someone living outside of what society has deemed acceptable. She concludes by blasting the tendency of academic researchers to “debunk” the Aryan Jesus, insisting “that biblical revisionist won’t be satisfied until they discover that Jesus was *really* a bisexual, cross-dressing,

whale-saving, tobacco-hating, vegetarian African Queen who actually went to temple to lobby for women's rights." (De la Torre, 2002)

Now look, I believe Kathleen Parker's reaction is a little extreme . . . alright, it's A LOT extreme, but what more can we expect from a culture that wishes to create a God in their image of what is good and just rather than accept that God has created ALL MANKIND in His image. On the flip side, James Cone, an advocate of Black liberation theology, states that, "white theology cannot be Christian theology. Rather, it becomes a theology of white oppressors that provides divine sanction for criminal acts committed upon those who are oppressed." Consider all those who have been hurt and rejected throughout the centuries by those claiming to know Christ. It isn't as if they are innately bad people with evil intentions, it is that they have been asked the question, "Who do you say that I am?" and have allowed their response to be clouded by social and cultural bias and Eurocentric, as well as, egocentric theology.

The name of Jesus has been used historically to justify oppression and injustice. Herein lies the basic question then, for those who define themselves as being amongst the margins of society, which I might add make up a cultural and societal majority rather than a minority, "Does the image of Christ," that is, our image of who Jesus is, "provide life and provide it more abundantly?" Jesus said, "I come that you may have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10) and yet we, in our limited wisdom and

human frailty create an image of Jesus that limits, hinders and goes against the very nature of His mission; to provide abundant life.

Miquel De la Torre writes that inevitably each semester he teaches one of his students will ask him how he would physically describe Jesus.

"They really want me to comment on the color of his skin," he writes. "Is it white? Black? Olive tone?" De la Torre states that, "[He] always respond[s] in the same fashion: when I attempt to picture the incarnation, I envision Jesus as an old black Latina woman with AIDS. Why? [Because] the most disdained by society is the form the Deity takes. [As a result] of racism, sexism, agism, and society's fear of AIDS, such a person is normatively avoided, ignored and shunned. Yet in Matthew, Jesus says that he is just that person: "Truly I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of these, the least of my people, you did it to me" (25:40).

Jesus explains that there is a purpose for His being with those who are hungry, thirsty, naked, alien, imprisoned and ill. Whatever Jesus may look like, he can be found in the pain, hurts and struggles of the disenfranchised, not because they are holier and not because they are more (or less) deserving, but because they must struggle for abundant life.

It has been said that, "perception is reality." I'm not so sure this is true. It may be that perception is how we interpret reality, but that does

not make it real; rather it just makes it easier for us to accept or comprehend. All people depict ultimate reality in a form native to their own culture, thus for many in our culture today and quite possibly for many of us sitting here today, a Eurocentric Christ, dominates and guides our every action, word and deed. However, to truly know who Christ is we must acknowledge that, while dominant for much of society, the socially popular vision of Christ can seem powerless for those who have been oppressed, rejected and forgotten. De la Torre writes, "The margins of society, in the here and now, in this time and place, are understood as encompassing the poor, Hispanics, Amerindians, Asian Americans, and Blacks, members of other disenfranchised groups, women and gays."

So again, here the question that Jesus is asking today, "Who do you say that I am?" While many in our culture today busy themselves with the debate of God's existence, those of us who find ourselves disenfranchised, reduced, by definition, to the margins of society, attempt to ascertain the character of God. Some have used scripture, pulled out of context and read without the understanding of the cultural influence it authors to characterize God, to determine His nature and to claim to know His every will. While the Bible reveals crucial revelations of God's character, we must remember that the Bible is not God. "To assert the biblical text as divine borders on heresy," De la Torre writes, "in the same way that the Israelites confused the raised bronzed serpent with God." (Numbers 21:4 – 9) Thus Jesus, being

God made flesh, becomes our focus. Just as we catch a glimpse of how society characterizes God in how they answer His question, so we too, define God through our own response. How will you respond to Him today? Who do you say that He is? Who is Jesus? To be honest, before today I had never stopped to think of Jesus as an old black Latina woman with AIDS; but maybe I should have. Then again, why does it have to be so specific? As I look out amongst this community of faith this morning I see Jesus everywhere; in the eyes of our children, amidst the tearful moments of prayer from our mothers and fathers, and in the encouraging warm embrace of those who greet each other weekly. In the pouring of a cup of coffee, the well thought out design of our bulletins, and the welcoming of first time visitors, I see Jesus and begin to understand more and more about who He is and what it means to know Him. If you are here today and you know nothing more of Jesus than the Eurocentric depictions offered to you through a lifetime of ritual iced with apathy, then let go today and ask Him to show who He is. Ask Him to come into your heart, into your life and to be your Lord. Let us pray:

Dear Heavenly Father:

We have come to you today and sought your understanding, your guidance and your will. There are those here today who count themselves, and rightly so, amongst those who are disenfranchised and thus marginalized by society. Speak to them, reach out them and

encourage them Lord that they may come to know You and Your will for their lives. Help us all Lord to become angry; angry at a society that marginalizes its members; angry at a world that hurts one another in your name; and angry that we have wasted so much time and energy defining you in our image rather than glorying in revelation that you have created us all in your image. Lead us, guide us and help us to never forget all that you have commanded of us. In Christ name we pray. Amen!