

Who do you say that I am? That's what Jesus asks Peter in today's Gospel. Who do you say that I am? And the profundity and radical simplicity of this question stops me in my tracks

Who do you say that I am?

It lands like a rock thrown into some pond at the center of my chest and the ripples go out and out and out towards some distant shore I can't yet see.

Who do you say that I am?

And I don't have a simple answer

I don't think Jesus means this as a gotcha question, a question meant to trip Peter up, like they run on Facebook every once in a while: **What sort of heretic are you?** I don't think Jesus is asking the question this way, because Jesus is a sincere teacher, like the teachers we will commission today. I think he asks the question because he really ... wants to know.

Who do you say that I am?

The answer apparently is complicated. Even the disciples see him differently. We will later learn in John's Gospel that Jesus is the way and the truth and the life but what that looks like can be different to different people.

*Why do we keep forgetting this?*

After all, Peter got the answer technically right. Jesus **is** the Messiah. But Peter's understanding of what sort of messiah Jesus will be is inadequate. He has more to learn. And because Jesus **IS** a way, a path and not simply a right answer to a gotcha question, Peter can only learn who Jesus is by **following him**.

But how can you follow someone *when you don't know exactly who they are?*

One way is to make yourself certain. Narrow the possibilities. Erase the uncertainties and contradictions. Know that you are right. And perhaps boost your confidence by telling others that they are wrong.

Another way is to stop looking and do it by rote. By habit. By memory. I know this path already. I don't have to look. I just go through the motions and that makes me feel better and that's what matters for me. That's my Jesus.

I suppose you could say the councils of the imperial church were another way of trying to nail down once and for all the nature of Jesus.<sup>1</sup>

What Peter did however, was more radical. He **built** a church. He cleared a place in which to continually ask and try to answer *Jesus' question: Who do you say that I am?* rather than the questions preoccupying kings and popes and state theologians, who may have been more eager to consolidate their own power rather than meet Jesus again as if for the first time.

And in my opinion, we are STILL trying to build that church. It's a work that requires being open, even as our Father Ted is open, with his current study group on the beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. Ted is open to meeting Jesus again and then again and then again, *as if for the first time*. Remember Mary Magdalene at the tomb, wailing "Where have they taken my lord?" And then, she

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<sup>1</sup> Answers to this question were eventually codified in the first 7 councils of the Roman church from 325-787 CE, shaping what became Catholic orthodoxy. I wonder how Jesus and the apostles might have voted.

begins wondering: who is that stranger over there who looks so familiar? The gardener...? Oh my lord and my God!”

It’s as if Jesus is asking her: *Mary, who do **you** say that I am?*

That’s why we do this following in community, with each other as good teachers, broadening our understanding of Jesus by hearing who he is in other lives.

Who Jesus is has certainly changed on my journey. Who he was to me when I was a child and when I was a teenager and who he is today is a process, a journey, a revelation. A journey that continues throughout our life and even beyond. *For then I saw through a glass darkly and now face to face.*

And this is why I go to church because when Jesus asks me that question: *Who do you say that I am?* a stone drops into a pond at the center of my heart and the waves go out and out ....until they reach the far shore that is *my practice*, my church practice, my church community and the celebration of the Eucharist. I go to church where my questioning is contained by my practice and there the waves of my questioning heart meet the edge of a container which is my **church** and the waves come back to me until my heart is full to the brim again. My questions about Jesus don’t deplete me but held by the container of church, they fill me up. I can relax and go deeper. I can make peace with mystery and a depth of belief I didn’t know I was capable of. And eventually the question changes. Eventually it is *me* asking Jesus a question. Jesus...Who do you say that I am? Jesus, who am I? And well, that can change everything.

Amen