

## **“WHO IS THIS MAN?”**

*Matthew 16:13-20*

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Most of you know that I have two sons. I can honestly say that as a parent, as a father, I have enjoyed my sons at every age and stage of their lives. It was fun when they were babies (most of the time!). It was especially fun when they started to talk. I enjoyed the baby talk, but it was more fun when they got to the place when we could actually have a conversation. I remember the stage when everything was “why?” No matter what you said, no matter how detailed and comprehensive the answer, their response was always, “why?”

Then life started to get a little more complicated. There was the time when Tim, about seven years old, asked one day, “Dad, where did I come from?” Great beads of perspiration appeared on my forehead. My throat got dry. I knew this day would eventually come, but so soon? As a psychology major, I knew I should not use euphemisms or beat around the bush, so I cleared my throat, and as best I could, explained the facts of life, how the love between his mother and me had resulted in his birth, and two years later, the birth of his brother Steve. Hoping that I had done an adequate job, and bracing myself for the follow-questions that were sure to come, I waited patiently. But Tim said nothing. When I could contain my anxiety no longer, I asked, “Do you understand, Tim?” He nodded that he did. “Why do you ask where you came from?” I ventured. “Well,” Tim replied, “At school Josh said he came from New York, and I wondered where I came from.”

From the cradle to the grave, life presents us with one question after another. Some are easy to answer. Some are more complex. I learned a valuable lesson that day. It is important to match the depth of the answer with the intent of the question!

Some questions are difficult to answer, as I have indicated. Some questions are not supposed to be answered, at least in a direct way. They are called “rhetorical questions,” and are the stock in trade of preachers and other public speakers. It’s a time-honored way of luring an audience into a speech — pose a question to your listeners — a rhetorical question.

“And how can this be?” or “What should we do in light of this situation?” We are all familiar with rhetorical questions. Rhetorical questions can backfire. One Sunday a pastor-friend of mine was in the middle of a sermon posing rhetorical questions. “What is the answer to this problem?” He asked repeatedly. “What is the answer?” A little boy in the second row blurted out, “I give up, preacher. Tell us the answer!”

Everybody knows that you are not supposed to answer a rhetorical question. The trouble with rhetorical questions in sermons is they often fall into two general categories: either the answer is painfully obvious, or it is ridiculously impossible. Someone has said, philosophy is the discipline that deals with two types of questions: questions to which everybody already knows

the answer, and questions to which nobody has ever known the answer!

Life presents us with tough questions. Most of us really don't like open-ended, impossible to answer questions. We like answers. In fact, I dare say that's the reason most of us are in church this morning — we want answers. Through answers we seek to resolve the tough questions, like "Is my life really worth living? Does God really know me and care about me? How can I live with confidence and hope for the future? What about eternity and my place in it?"

Now to be sure, the Christian faith offers answers to these questions and many more. But the answers are not cut and dried. Nor is living a life of faith like following a recipe in Grandma's cookbook. The Bible is full of answers, but the Bible does not give us a step by step, color-coded, follow these four spiritual laws answer to the complex questions of life.

We give simple and sometimes simplistic answers to our children's questions. I have seen folks grow up, go to college and receive advanced degrees. They understand in depth a body of knowledge that for most of us is mysterious and incomprehensible. They have moved far beyond a lay person's knowledge of their specialty. Yet when it comes to matters of faith, they persist with their childhood understanding of reality and the way God works.

As a pastor, I am often confronted with people who want answers to their questions, "Does God answer prayer?" "Will Jewish people go to heaven?" "Why does God permit so much evil and suffering in the world?" They want answers. But many are looking for a faith they can put on a bumper sticker or a refrigerator magnet or a few principles they can put in their PDA's to refer to when the going gets rough.

The really good sermons, I have been told, are the ones that keep it simple. I recently heard a preacher who, before he spoke, had the ushers hand out small sheets of paper with the numbers one, two and three listed on them. Then he began his sermon, "How Can I Find Happiness in Life?" "I have three things I want to say about finding happiness in life, and I want you to write these three things on the slip of paper before you. Follow these principles and you will find happiness," he said.

I sat there thinking, what planet is he from? I was thinking that morning of my nephew, whose young wife died in a tragic accident on Memorial Day week-end, leaving him with three children, the youngest still breast-feeding at the time. How do these principles apply to what he is dealing with right now? Life is so much more complicated than what is offered by a simplistic faith. We of the church do people a disservice when we try to offer simple answers to the complex questions of life. Maybe you will disagree with me this morning, but I think our problem in the church is not that we don't give people straightforward answers. I think our problem is that too often we play into people's desires for obvious, pat answers, and thereby avoid the difficult, impossible questions. I repeat, our faith cannot be reduced to a bumper sticker or to a simple formula. The God we worship is so much more interesting than that. Jesus is so much larger than that. Life is so much more demanding than that.

This morning's Gospel lesson contains two questions: they are not rhetorical questions, nor are they questions which have a simple answer. One of the commentators has said that this discussion between Jesus and his disciples, these questions Jesus posed at Caesarea Philippi are a defining moment for the Gospel story. These questions will have profound implications for the faith and for the church. The questions Jesus asks are these: "*Who do people say that the Son of man is?*" and "*Who do you say that I am?*"

The question, “**Who is Jesus?**” is perhaps the most significant question we will ever encounter in life. How the early church answered that question changed the shape of world history. How we answer that question will change the shape of our lives. It is not a question that can be answered easily or simply. It is a question that is followed by a “so what.” What difference, if any, is the answer going to make in your life?

When Jesus turns to the disciples and says, “*Who do people say that the Son of man is?*” he is gathering information. This is the reporting question, the kind of thing we read in the daily newspaper. Who is Barack Obama? Who is John McCain? These are relevant questions as we seek factual information in preparation for the November elections.

Through the years, the church and the world have sought to answer the question, “Who is Jesus?” Creeds have been formulated. Litmus tests of faith have been established. Folks have died based on the answer they have given to that question. Early in the church’s history it was established that Jesus was fully God and fully human. All of us are children of God, created in God’s image. But in Jesus the presence of God dwelt more fully and more completely than in you and in me. We also are taught that Jesus was not a superman, but rather experienced the same bodily needs and wants that the rest of us experience. Because he was human, he understands what we are going through. Because he was God, he gives us an example of what our lives can be. Those of us who have been through Confirmation or an adult study on Christian beliefs know the teaching of the church. That’s the official answer: Jesus is fully God and fully human.

But then Jesus asks the second question, “*Who do you say that I am?*” Now the question shifts from the Creeds, the television report, the newspaper article, to the individual believer. Jesus moves from the third person perspective, “*Who do people say that I am?*” to the second person, “*Who do you say that I am?*”

Jesus directs the question to all the disciples, but only Peter stands up to answer. The purpose of including Peter’s answer may be to highlight Peter’s role as a leader in the early church. Jesus replies, “*You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.*” Yet the distinction between a general address to the disciples and the individual response of Peter suggests that each believer must offer a personal reply. It is not enough to respond to Jesus’ question with what other people think, to repeat what other people say, to agree to the prevailing view. Each Christian believer must answer this question for him or herself.

Peter knew the answer to the question. He replies, “*You are the Messiah, the Christ, the son of the living God.*” That was the answer to the question, of course. But it took Peter a lifetime to understand the meaning of the sentence he uttered that day. When you and I stand before this altar and take our membership vows, whether as youth or as adults, we may answer the questions correctly, but these are not simple answers, and I submit we will continue to learn along the way what it means to be a Christian. Most of us do not make one decision to follow Jesus, and then consistently live our lives for him from that day forward. Every day we are confronted with whether or not we will allow Jesus to be the Lord of our lives.

Although I have been a Christian since I was ten years old, a member of the church since I was eleven, and a pastor since I was 23, I am still learning who Jesus is and what following him means for my life. I confess that I still have unanswered questions.

We need to beware, though, when our questions keep us from making a commitment to follow Jesus, for it is in the following that many of our questions are answered. Many are put off

by some of the seemingly illogical or unscientific claims of the Bible. How can I believe that Jonah survived three days in the belly of a whale? Is it possible for a modern, scientific person like me to take the Bible seriously? Sometimes we keep the Gospel at arms length by asking a barrage of theoretical, pointless questions that make no real difference in our lives. Sometimes we ask questions such as , “How can a sophisticated person like me believe the Bible?” when our real question is, “How might my life have to change if I really followed Jesus as my Savior?” Our superficial, pointless questions thereby keep us from the real question. It takes a great deal of wisdom to know the pointless questions from the real questions. To be a person of faith is to be willing, not simply to put tough questions to God, but to let God question us. “*Who do you say that I am?*” There is no more important question than this. Who is Jesus in your life and mine?

Peter’s answer proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah, God’s chosen and anointed one. Upon this confession by Peter, acting as spokesperson for the disciples, Jesus builds his church. Not a building, mind you, but a gathered community that will last for all time. The gates of Hades — a euphemism for all the evil of this world — will never be a match for the strength of the body of Christ. When we here on earth challenge injustice and when we practice mercy, we live out the prayer, “Thy Kingdom come.” In so doing we employ the keys to the kingdom, the keys to a meaningful life that begins here and now and continues into the hereafter.

A friend of mine signs all his letters with the phrase, “*Yours in the only cause that really matters.*” May God guide us not only to give the right answers, but to ask the right questions.

*Prayer:* Dear God, as you came to the disciples at Caesarea Philippi, so we believe that you are standing before each of us today asking “Who is Jesus?” “Who do you say that I am?” Help us not only to answer the question, but to allow our lives to be changed by the answer we give. Help us to follow Jesus, today and every day. Amen.