

The Most Important Question

Matthew 16:13-20

Jesus and his disciples ventured into the District of Caesarea Philippi, an area about 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee. The region had tremendous religious implications. The place was littered with the temples of the Syrian gods. Here also was the elaborate marble temple that had been erected by Herod the Great, father of the then ruling Herod Antipas. There was the influence of the Greek gods, and also the worship of Caesar as a God himself. You might say that the world religions were on display in this town. It was with this scene in the background that Jesus chose to ask the most crucial questions of his ministry.

He looked at his disciples and in a moment of reflection said: "*Who do people say that I am?*" The disciples begin sharing with Jesus what they have heard from the people who have been following Jesus: Some say that you are Elijah; others say John the Baptist, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. It's always been this way, Jesus is seen by many people in so many different ways.

You can speak of Jesus as prophet, holy man, teacher, or spiritual leader, and very few will object. But speak of him as Son of God, divine, of the same nature as God, and often people will express their disapproval.

A billion Muslims will say: "Prophet, yes. God, no!" Jews scattered around the world will say: "Teacher, yes. Messiah, no!" Even agnostics and atheists of various stripes will say: "Exemplary man, yes. Divine, no!" Who do people say he is? Who do you say he is? And what are we called to do about it?

When Jesus asked that question he did so in his first and only trip outside of Palestine. It was a critical moment in his life. He was near the end of his ministry and it was time that he is alone with his disciples, far from the watchful eyes of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and other religious authorities and assess the last three years of ministry. Did they now understand who he was? Were all his efforts fruitful or had it all been in vain? It was a critical moment and critical moments call for critical questions, "*Who do people say that I am?*"

The disciples responded, some say that you are Elijah. Now why would people think that Jesus was the long deceased prophet Elijah? Elijah was, of course, a highly revered personality in the religious life of the Hebrews. His defeat of the 450 prophets of Baal on the top of Mt. Carmel was a story well known even by the little children. To show you the great importance of Elijah, remember that when Jesus was transfigured, two men from the past came back from the past to speak to him — Moses and Elijah.

But there was yet another reason why people thought that Jesus was Elijah. Do you ever read the late Charles Schulz's comic strip Peanuts? One day we see that the television is on but there is no one in the room listening to it. The announcer is talking about a golf tournament that is in process. He says, "Smith has to make this putt to win the championship. There will be no tomorrow." And just as he says "There will be no tomorrow," in walks Lucy. She immediately goes into a panic and starts running around and yelling to the other children: "The world is coming to an end. They just announced it on television. The world is coming to an end." Her panic quickly spreads as we see all the Peanuts kids go wildly screaming about. Finally in the last square we see all of the children huddled on the top of Snoopy's doghouse waiting for the end of the world. And Linus finally speaks up with a puzzled voice, "I thought that Elijah was supposed to come back first."

Well, Linus, the resident theologian of the strip, knew his Bible. It was a commonly held belief among the Hebrews that one day Elijah would return and that that would mark the end of the world. In the very last passage in the Old Testament, the book of Malachi contains these words: "*Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.*" Clearly Elijah's coming would mark the most important day in the history of the world. Jesus understood this. Perhaps that is why in Matthew 11 Jesus said to the crowds "*If you are willing to accept it, John the Baptist is Elijah who is to come.*" In that one statement Jesus proclaimed that he was the messiah and the end of what they had known had come. But he knew not many would be able to accept it.

But, others said that Jesus was John the Baptist who has come back to life. You'll remember that John the Baptist's career was cut short when he confronted Herod Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee, for sleeping with his brother's wife. Herod had John beheaded, but his death soon turned into martyrdom and John's popularity among the people flourished.

John the Baptist was the first prophet to come on the scene in over 400 years. His austere lifestyle closely patterned that of Elijah before him. While the upper classes and the religious establishment rejected his message, he received wild acceptance among the masses and many were baptized under his ministry.

By saying that Jesus was John the Baptist reincarnated, the people were saying of Jesus that he was a great and powerful prophet in the line of Elijah.

Jesus turns to his disciples and he asks his most personal friends, his inner circle, his trusted students the critical question: *Who do you say that I am?*

Who do you say I am? The world was turned upside down on the answer to that question. By answering Elijah, John the Baptist and Jeremiah, the people paid Jesus compliments of the highest order. They were exalting the man Jesus. But it was the wrong answer, and so Jesus asks their personal opinion: "*But who do you say that I am?*" In other words, you have told me what other people think, but I want to know what you think. Who do you say that I am? I would suggest to you this morning that that is still the most urgent, the most relevant, the most

theological question that confronts us today. Wherever we turn in life we are faced with the implications of this question.

The Gospel writers attempted to answer this most fundamental question in their own fashion. They bestowed upon Jesus numerous titles and claims: Son of David, Son of Man, Son of God, Divine Physician, king, prophet, bridegroom, light of the world, the door, the vine, high priest, the firstborn of creation, the bright and morning star, and Alpha and the Omega. According to scholar William Barclay, no less than 68 titles were applied to Jesus. All of these were attempts to answer this question posed by Jesus.

But these are attempts made by others. Jesus is more concerned what your answer is than what their answer is. Martin Luther, the German theologian and great reformer of the church, wrote: "I care not whether he be Christ, but that he be Christ for you."

There are great things to do for the kingdom of God once you have come to the point that you too can echo the words of Peter, "*You are the Christ the son of the living God,*" your life will never be the same. Ask the woman at the well, ask Mary Magdalene or Paul, ask Martin Luther or John Calvin, ask Mother Teresa or Bishop Tutu, ask some people in this church.

Who do you say that I am? Discover the answer to that and you will discover the answer to life itself. What then is the church to do with this information? Jesus gives Peter the keys to the Kingdom. He hands him the authority to conduct the business of God. Now go out into this world and make good things happen in my church and point to injustice and call it to account.

Let me ask you what will you do with your confession of Christ? Perhaps you've heard about these 3 doctors on their way to the golf course who get into a car accident and they all die. They are now standing before the gates of heaven and St. Peter says to the first: "Why should I let you in?" He replies: "Look at my file! I am a research physician. I developed all kinds of procedures to prolong people's lives." St. Peter checks out the folder and says: "OK, you can come in." Then he asks the second: "Why should I let you in?" The fellow replies: "Look at my file; I was a surgeon and took away much pain and suffering in people's lives." St. Peter thumbs through the folder and tells him: "OK, you're in" Then he asks the third doctor: "Why should I let you in?" The man proudly declares: "I started a health insurance company. Because of me thousands of folks have access to medical care that they would never have had before." St. Peter thinks about it and then says: "Ok, you can come in too...but only for forty-eight hours!"

A Navy Chaplain recalled his career, which involved serving aboard large ships, including a battleship. He said he was always amazed when the order came for all the sailors to assume their battle stations. Immediately sailors were flying around all over the decks. Quickly they all stood at their posts. The Chaplain said he was always impressed that each sailor knew exactly where he should be, exactly what he should do, exactly when he should do it. A few later, after his retirement, he said that he had the pleasure of being on a ship again, this time a cruise ship. As he walked around the different decks, he started thinking about the difference between his experience on the battleship and the cruise ship.

I'd like for you to take a moment to contrast the differences between the two--the battleship and the cruise ship. Why does that matter?

For this important reason: there are many church people who think their church is a cruise ship, whereas Christ called us to be a battleship. There are people who think church is about having their own personal needs met - their needs for fellowship, for worship, for spiritual growth and comfort. And, if our cruise ship doesn't measure up, why they'll just look for one that does. These are people who simply "come to church." There is a difference between coming to church and being the church. When you are the church then you take a different attitude. Instead of looking at the church as a place where you can have your needs met, you begin to look at church as a place where you can meet the needs of those for whom Christ died, those who are oppressed, those who hunger both physically and spiritually, and those who are lonely and in pain. Suddenly your cruise ship becomes a battleship and the enemies are all the forces of injustice and death and destruction in this world.

Who do you say Jesus is? Jesus is the Christ. It's a statement we can all agree on here, on Sunday morning, during worship. This is the easy part. But the much more demanding part of our faith is faced each day, as the Christian community is scattered among the world at large, and Jesus asks each one of us, each and every day *"Who do you say that I am?"*

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