

Who Do You Say That I Am?

Mark 8:27-30

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In ancient Greece long before the time of Jesus, there was a temple dedicated to Apollo at Delphi. People travelled there from all over the Greek world to bring their questions to the Oracle at Delphi. According to ancient lore, her answers were always cryptic and true in surprising ways. When the overwhelming Persian forces looked to sack Athens in 480 BC, she told the Athenians, "Though all else shall be taken, Zeus, the all-seeing, grants that the wooden wall only shall not fail." The self-aware Themistocles took this to mean that only the construction of a navy would save the city and it, in fact, did.

How did Themistocles know to build a navy when the oracle called for a wooden wall? He took to heart the maxim inscribed at the entry way to the temple: Know thyself. The key to interpreting a prophecy is knowing your own limitations. This, of course, could only be done by asking the right questions of the prophecy and yourself.

This Sunday marks the beginning of our new Lenten sermon series, *The Questions of Jesus*. The season of Lent is a time when we ask ourselves the tough questions. As we prepare for Easter when we celebrate Christ's resurrection, we pause to remember what Jesus lived, died, rose again for. Living fully into the spirit of this season requires learning more about Jesus and ourselves.

As we approach Easter, we will encourage you to draw closer to Jesus by wrestling with some of his most challenging questions. This, of course, does not preclude you from adopting some of the traditional Lenten disciplines, if you so choose. There's nothing wrong with giving up Diet Coke and gluten for a month and a half. If that draws you closer to Jesus too, all the better.

The inspiration for this sermon series comes from UCC minister Martin Copenhaver's book, *Jesus is the Question*. I believe the book's driving question comes right from today's reading. "[Jesus] asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" While many of us would agree with Peter that Jesus is the Messiah, as one sketches the identity of Jesus in greater detail, she is bound to take some artistic liberty. Most of our sources about Jesus derive from a few texts, which by no means present a unified image. Ever since Jesus' death, people have struggled with the question of who was this man from Nazareth. Even the compilers of the New Testament could not agree on who Jesus was: the Jesus of Mark is very different than John; likewise the Jesus presented in Galatians is very different than James.

Copenhaver offers a simple insight that is crucial for us in discerning who Jesus was and therefore continues to be in our lives: Jesus is someone who asks lots of questions. In fact, he asks 307 questions throughout the gospels, while only answering three

questions directly! Copenhaver's thesis challenges the reader to set aside the traditional paradigm of Jesus as the answer to our problems in favor of one where Jesus is actually the question. His Jesus is not one who gives easy answers but instead someone who asks the tough questions encouraging us to dig deeper into life's mysteries.

What today's scripture makes clear is that a personal question can be the hardest. Jesus on the road to Caesarea Philippi asks his disciples, "Who do the people say I am?" This is easy. They've been rolling with Jesus for a while now all over the Holy Land--we're half way through Mark at this point--and they've heard what the people have been saying. This response requires little in terms of personal stake, so little that Mark doesn't even bother to identify a particular speaker. They respond like a chorus saying they have heard John the Baptist, Elijah, and just a plain old prophet.

Then Jesus makes things a bit more interesting and asks, "Who do **you** say that I am?" All of a sudden they aren't so quick to answer. You can easily imagine the whole lot of them tapping their feet and averting their eyes as they try to wait Jesus out with silence. Finally, Peter speaks up as he so often does, "You are the Messiah." Peter courageously stakes his claim. If he had said that in front of the wrong person, the religious authorities could have had them all killed for blasphemy.

As the church today, we can answer honestly with significantly less repercussions, but the question of who Jesus is to me, or to you, is still significant. How we identify Jesus says a great deal about how we relate to the world as Christians. For example, emphasizing Jesus' lordship focuses on submission to *his* rules over those of worldly authorities. While emphasizing Jesus' role as teacher lifts up the church's role in offering moral guidance. To reveal your preferred identity of Jesus shows your hand as to what you value most.

Engaging personal questions can be scary, but they can yield fruit. I had to face them when I began my ordination process. I was quivering before I could click send and share my spiritual journey paper. It was only five or six pages, but I had spent most of the summer working on it. I could only type away at my computer in small increments because the task simply felt overwhelming. I had to put into words experiences that led me to think God was calling me to ministry. Yikes!

At the time, I was afraid that I would not have the words sufficiently eloquent to express the fullness of God's presence and call in my life. I did not want to appear foolish and simple to this council of elders, especially during my first visit.

Mercifully, my committee was gracious. They asked me questions that helped me to understand my journey. They weren't trying to entrap me in a "gotcha" moment. They were simply curious and determined to share their love and support as I entered a new and exciting phase of my life.

The end of discernment process ended much like that first meeting. They asked me a host of questions, including whether I felt called to assume the privileges and responsibilities of ordained Christian ministry. After years of questions, I had learned more about Jesus and myself than I could have ever imagined. I was ready to say, "Yes!"

And who do *I* say that Jesus is? I believe Jesus is the embodiment of God's self-giving love. From the beginning of time, that love has flowed through all of creation, imbuing all life with a desire to be in right relationship with God. In the midst of a broken world, Jesus, as the man from Nazareth, lived, died, and rose again to right the relationship between God and all creation.

This belief of who Jesus is drives me to heal the broken relationships in our human family and the natural world. With my ministry I hope to encourage relationships that allow for people to share their gifts freely and not fear being taken advantage of. I hope to be a part of a community that strives to find Christ in others while also taking time to enjoy the goodness of God's majesty.

I've arrived at this point of view by asking some tough questions, and I'm not afraid to let my answers drive my ministry. I'm also open to the Spirit and recognize that Christ may ask new questions of me that reshape this view.

Now, I am not suggesting you all begin pursuing ordained ministry, but I can testify to the clarity of mission that comes from asking hard questions. If you accept this challenge, you will surely not all arrive at the same answer. In fact, I would like to think there would be as many different answer to Jesus' question, "But who do you say that I am?" as there are people gathered in this room. When Congregational churches are at their best, uniformity is not a prerequisite for unity. We encourage one another with our testimonies. We don't test for dogmatic purity. We have faith that we are gathered here in the living Spirit of Jesus, a single body with many members.

As you listen to these sermons in Lent, engage Jesus' questions with us. Let yourself become more aquatinted with who Jesus is to you. Know thyself. Just as the Bible needs many descriptions of Jesus, we need people dedicated to living out Jesus ministry in many forms to meet the diverse needs of a hurting world.

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