

Who do you say that I am?
Matthew 16: 13-20
Ypsilanti First United Methodist Church
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Names are important. We are reminded of this point in William Shakespeare's famous play Romeo and Juliet where Juliet says to Romeo, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet."

The Journal of the American Medical Association did a study on the names of people in the medical profession in the United States. Doctors' names included: Needle, Probe, Lance, Drill, Scope, Bolt, Pin, Croak and Klutz. On the upside, they also found physicians named Fix, Cure, Heal, Brilliant, Able and Best. One of my good friends from Seminary is Amy Miracle, and now of course she is the Reverend Miracle, serving a Presbyterian church in Des Moines, Iowa.

Do names make a difference? Can a person's name determine his or her destiny? If you had the choice, would you pick Dr. Brilliant or Dr. Klutz or Rev. Miracle? ...

"But who do you say I am?" i

Jesus asked this question on his first and only trip outside of Palestine. It was no accident that Jesus came to this region, for it was a symbol both of pagan culture and foreign domination. And it is also no accident that it is here in this place of

brokenness, domination and oppression that Jesus announces his intention to build the church. With Peter as one of the foundational stone, Jesus decides to build a church based not on domination, not on oppression but rather on love and grace.

Who do you say that I am?

Jesus asks the disciples this question. And the disciples respond with the names others have given Jesus. John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, a great prophet. And Jesus looks at them and says these answers are who other people say that I am. What I am asking you is not what other people think, but rather what do you think?

Who do you say that I am?

It is a very direct and personal question. Who do you say that I am? And it is not only a question for Jesus' original disciples, but for disciples of every age.

Who do you say that I am?

In our day and time Jesus usually appears on the cover of Time magazine and Newsweek at least once a year. Some say Jesus was a great moral and political leader like Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. Some say a great prophet like

Mohammed. Still others say a great spiritual teacher to be numbered with the likes of the Buddha, Confucius, Lao-tzu, or the Dalai Lama.

Some say Jesus was a political revolutionary and enlist him in their cause. Some say he was a capitalist and do the same. Hard to compass it, but there was actually a best selling book several years ago entitled Jesus-CEO. There are those who say he was clearly a socialist, and others who are just as sure that he was a liberal Democrat and others equally sure he was a Republican. Still others say he was but a dreamy idealist with his head in the clouds. Some call him Jesus Christ Superstar, while still others call him Jesus Christ the would-be-but-failed messiah.

Who do you say that I am?

Jesus' question is an invitation for all of us to stop taking refuge in the answers of others and answer for ourselves.

Who do you say that I am?

Who we say Jesus is reveals much about who we are and what we are willing to do for God's sake. Amid all the voices raised throughout the centuries since it was written, Matthew 16:13-20 invites us to find our own voice and answer Jesus' question for ourselves.

Who do you say that I am?

Of course finding the answer is our life's journey as well as it's own paradox. For to really know who Jesus is requires following him. It requires discipleship. For beyond all we can find to say about him and believe about him, he remains always beyond our grasp, except maybe once in a while the hem of his garment. We can love him, we can learn from him, but we come to know him only by following him—by searching for him in his church, in his gospels, in each other, in the very living of our lives and in the community.

Ordinary people wondering how on earth to be faithful Christians have this rather simple prescription: Focus on Jesus. Listen to his teachings, examine his life, notice his relationships, hear his questions and follow his invitation to be his disciple. It may seem rather simplistic. But deceptively so.

Focus on Jesus, follow after him and then we find the answer to his question

Who do you say that I am?

Preacher Frederick Buechner tells a wonderful story about a Christmas pageant a friend of his took part in as the rector of an Episcopal church somewhere. The manger was down in front at the chancel steps where it always is. Mary was there in a blue mantle and Joseph in a cotton beard. The wise men were there

with a handful of shepherds, and of course in the midst of them all the Christ child was there, lying in the straw. The nativity story was read aloud.. with carols sung at the appropriate places, and all went like clockwork until it came time for the arrival of the angels of the heavenly host as represented by the children of the congregation, who were robed in white and scatted throughout the pews with their parents.

At the right moment they were supposed to come forward and gather around the manger saying “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and good will to all,” and that is just what they did except there were so many of them that there was a fair amount of crowding and jockeying for position, with the result that one particular angel, a girl who was about nine years old and who was smaller than most of them, ended up so far out on the fringes of things that not even by craning her neck and standing on tiptoe could she see what was going on.

“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and good will toward all,” they sang on cue, and then in the momentary pause that followed, the little girl electrified the entire church by crying out in a voice shrill with irritation and frustration and enormous sadness at having her view blocked, “Let Jesus show”!

“Let Jesus show”! ⁱⁱ

Who do you say that I am? Let Jesus show! Who is Jesus? Let Jesus show. Show in the places where he is hidden. Show in the church. Show in the world.

Show in the joy of living. Show in the depths of despair. Show in the places where we struggle. Show in the places where we are searching for answers. Show in the places where we journey. Show in the places where there is sorrow and death and destruction. Show in the hopeless places where people hunger and thirst for justice and righteousness. Let Jesus show and we will know who he is.

Who do you say that I am? Jesus asks.

Finding the answer mean finding ourselves and Jesus and the life we are all called to live.

Who do you say that I am?

Let Jesus show and we will come to know. Amen.

ⁱ Based on sermon ideas from: —John David Clarke, “But who do you say that I am?” Sermon at Saint Bartholomew’s Church, August 21, 2005, stbarts.org.

ⁱⁱ As told by Buechner, Frederick in “Let Jesus Show” **Secrets in the Dark: a Life in Sermons** Harper San Francisco 2006 p. 270