

The Pointed Question

By
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Matthew 16:13-20

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

I'm not sure I would have asked that first question. Here in Matthew's version, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" That makes it sound like he is trying to see if the disciples can identify the Son of Man. It's a term that comes from the Book of Daniel, as a particular person who suffers and is exalted before God. But in Mark's earlier version, the Greek is more direct. Jesus asks, "Who do people say that *I* am?" Just hearing him ask it makes my stomach hurt.

Honestly, do we really want to know what others think of us? That can be a painful disclosure. "Well, Frank, people think you're funny, but not as funny as you think you are." I don't want to hear it. Asking those who know us best to tell us what they see, no thank you.

But Jesus isn't self-conscious like that. He wants his closest followers to tell him what others see. And then he asks the question that is so personal the disciples needed to stare down at their sandals so as not to see his face when he looked at them like he was seeing straight into their soul. "You are the Christ," Peter said, with a mixture of boldness and awe, "the Son of the living God."

After Peter's confession, Jesus blesses him, and with a turn of phrase in the Greek plays off the similarity of the words *rock* and the name *Peter*, Jesus says that from this admission he will build his church. The word "church" is used in the Gospels only twice.

A new community has now been formed that will be distinguished first and foremost by its confession. Something St. Paul will write out again and again: Jesus is Lord. And all these years later, that confession is the rock on which the church stands. But what does it mean to build a community off it?

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This scripture illustrates our ecclesiology; the study, nature, and meaning of the church. The word “church” or *Ekklesia* in the Greek, means “called out.” It was used in the wider Hellenistic culture to refer to a gathering of persons for a political assembly. They were the ones called out from among their community to lead with authority.

Matthew intends for this gathering to be much more than any kind of administrative institution. He is inviting the hearer to imagine this new community as a people set apart for a particular purpose, who are distinct from their own cultural setting, to be in and among without being completely of. This new community called the church would be shaped not only by the teachings, but by the living, the dying, and the rising of this first century Jewish rabbi.

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Admittedly, this not the most popular time to be the church of Jesus Christ. And I would say it’s not the most popular time to be a minister, but I’m not sure it’s ever really been “hip” to be a reverend. I can remember telling some of my fraternity brothers in college that I was going to seminary, and I can still picture their crestfallen faces.

They were concerned I would end up having to evolve into something between the likes of Billy Graham and Rasputin. And so, we have arrived at this point in American culture where a super majority of people under 35 have decided that organized religion just isn’t for them.

The truth is, I can’t blame them. Many of our problems as a church are self-inflicted. Our own brokenness and abusiveness has led to a betrayal of trust that many placed in us; especially the most vulnerable. Some of our problems are a result of a secularizing culture, which finds little regard for those who still believe in all this hocus pocus.

Many have been the recipients of what at best could be described as ignorant cruelty and feel that if this is what God’s love looks like, they

would like to pass. Some are rightly disturbed by the hubris of our faith leaders. Many see the world with all of its richness, beauty, history, and diversity, and say “how can one religion claim to have all the answers?” And of course, there is so much violence and terror, loss and destruction in the world, that one can’t help but wonder what kind of a creator watches, or even worse, blesses, any of this? I get it.

So, Jesus’ question here is a piercing inquiry to us. Who do *you* say that *I* am? It’s a question that is meant to be pointed, and to simultaneously point us to something beyond ourselves. It is a question of testimony. If you are to follow me, he asks, what will you confess to others you are doing? This confession from Peter is the ecclesial framework of discipleship.

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Last year I led a study on Rowan William’s brilliant but brief work, *Being Disciples*. There, the former Archbishop of Canterbury makes the case that discipleship is a state of being. It’s about being open to learn, grow, create, restore, and partner with God and neighbor in the redemption of the world. All of which has led me to think about what the church is, at its best. Or perhaps, what I hope for it to be.

At our best, the church is a story. The late Southern churchman and theologian, John Leith, said, “Jesus teaches us and becomes our example not so much through propositions we can learn or a fixed pattern we can imitate as through the story of his life. This story speaks to and makes sense of the story of our lives, the joys, frustrations, successes, and defeats we all know.

Leith says that telling the story of Jesus “is more than warmhearted evangelical piety...telling the story is our salvation.”¹ It’s why I’ve

¹ John H. Leith, *The Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has to Say That No One Else Can Say*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988) p. 62.

invited us to sing that old wonderful hymn after this. Telling the story of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love is to sing of a God who was so desperate to know us, that God became enfleshed in all of our mess.

And notice that Leith said following Jesus isn't about prepositions we can learn. We don't experience God's love by having the right beliefs. We experience God's love by hearing our own names in God's story. Our sense of belief flows from that.

At our best, the church is community. What we are doing in this stunning sanctuary Sunday after Sunday is practicing not only acts of praise and worship but acts of communal identity. We don't all think alike in here. We don't all vote alike. We don't all live in the same zip code or send our children to the same schools. We could just as easily choose to identify solely with those who are more like us, maybe at the club or the league. But what we do here, week in and week out, is something extraordinary.

We are choosing to be held together by a common story and confession: that Jesus is the Christ. And by doing so, we bind ourselves to one another in a particular way. We carry each other's joys as well as burdens. We volunteer for efforts of mission and outreach. We gather to learn in classes and small groups.

We visit the sick among us and hold each other up when someone we love is carried into God's everlasting arms. We pray for one another, and our wider world with all its blinding beauty and horror. We trust that as we keep Christ at the center, even as other things swirl around us, the center will hold.

At our best, the church is courageous. Because St. Paul reminds us that nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God, we rest in that promise, but we don't rest on our laurels. There is a lot of pain in the world, and some of it is our fault as broken creatures. We are called to care for the least and the lost, no matter how uncomfortable it makes us.

Not only that, we are called to challenge systems, policies, and powers that have made false idols in church and culture alike. We find moral bravery in the visionary saints who have gone before us and risked much to tell us what they saw. We are called to protect the preciousness of our earth. And because our freedom is in Christ, we work to liberate others.

In fact, our courage makes us trustworthy. Williams notes that when it came to the disciples, “they know that the presence that has called them is dependable and that while they may be insecure, volatile, and easily capable of betrayal, forgetting and running away, what they confront in the person they call Rabbi and Master is one who will not go away.”² Our courage to remain, to keep going after, to stay, to fight, to love is rooted in Jesus’ presence that does the same.

At our best, the church is humble. Even as we look to make sense of the divine and try to discern the Spirit’s will, we also confess mystery and our lack of answers. Two summers ago, as I was preparing to travel to Richmond for another class in my doctoral program, I heard one of my children talking to our young neighbor in our backyard. “My dad’s going to be a doctor soon,” I heard my son say before taking a big breath. “But not the kind that can help anyone.”

Filled as I was with such pride in myself in the first breath, it was the second breath that reminded me of the gift of humility. The church does not have all the answers, nor do we confess that our faith is the unquestionable path to God’s home, for Jesus tells us, “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold.” But we strive to be a community that wrestles with the hard questions of life together, and we keep pointing to a truth beyond ourselves that defies simple description or definition.

² Rowan Williams, *Being Disciples: Essential of the Christian Life*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016) p. 26.

That wonderful poet, Mary Oliver, mused once,
*I have refused to live locked in the orderly house of reasons and
proofs.*
The world I live in and believe in is wider than that.
*And anyway, what's wrong with Maybe?*³

And at our best, the church is faithful. Every time we confess who Jesus is, we are declaring what we are about in this time and place. Whenever we baptize or celebrate the Eucharist, we are reenacting God's terrifying grace that not only captures us and will not let us go, but paradoxically frees us to be merciful and loving in a world that doesn't see much virtue in those things.

Jesus tells Peter, not even the gates of Hades will prevail against it; a biblical expression that translates better as the doors of death. It means the church will never die. It reminds me of something Reinhold Niebuhr said when he wrote that the church is a citadel of hope on the edge of despair.⁴ Our faithfulness is bound up in our acts of forgiveness, peace, justice, community, courage, humility, wonder, and hope.

And Peter thought it was just a single pointed question. *Who do you say that I am?* I suspect Jesus is waiting for our answer now.

Amen.

³ Mary Oliver, *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2017) p. 5.

⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013 ed.) p. 62.