

Who Do You Say I Am?—August 23, 2020
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I did my internship on the south side of Chicago at an African American church. It seems so long ago, yet it shaped me as a pastor. The community I served was a middle-class community in a safe neighborhood. The people made me feel welcomed from the very beginning even though I was the only white person in the church. In fact, most days I would be the only white person around – even on days that I ran errands in the neighborhood, went to meetings, or attended events. At first it was exhausting. It reminded me of when Isaac and I lived in Hungary in a Roma village, and we were learning to speak Hungarian. I would go to bed mentally exhausted at the end of the day from living in a different culture all day every day. It's a kind of exhaustion that is hard to explain.

When I first started serving the congregation I had a hard time adapting to the worship service and cultural differences in the community. The service was nearly 2 hours long, and we had back-to-back service, so I was at worship for four hours on Sunday mornings. The hymns were not ones I knew, and they were in no hymnal, yet the pastor could just start singing an opening tune, and the entire congregation would join in on the next note with us without piano accompaniment. The sermons were like nothing I experienced before. They were social-justice oriented. They focused on God dwelling among the oppressed and that one day the oppressed will find freedom because of the cross. The sermons were at least 20 minutes long and much more interactive than I ever experienced with people calling out responses and the pastor adding to the sermon based off what the people needed to hear that week. There was an altar call after the sermon where I was expected to pray on the spot for individuals that came up for prayer. This part of the service could take 30 minutes. There were testimonies that were shared toward the end of the service where people could share with the community how they saw God working in their life the past week or raise a prayer request. This was not a “typical” Lutheran worship service for me. Yet everyone was Lutheran; the sermon was always preached with a Lutheran understanding of Grace and unconditional love. It was just different, and I needed to allow the people that I was serving to teach me who Jesus is to them, and I needed to learn how to share that experience of Jesus with them through pastoral leadership.

This question that Jesus asked the disciples in this text, “Who do you say I am?” is an important one. See, the disciples were on this journey with Jesus, witnessing all the miracles, getting much of the teaching first hand, yet even they were trying to wrap their heads around who they were following. And the idea of who the messiah is and what to expect from the messiah was probably different for each of them. The disciples came from a variety of backgrounds, and they were traveling into areas they’d only heard of before. They were being exposed to communities that probably challenged some of their assumptions (or stereotypes even) of what the community was like once they were in it, talking to the people, sharing bread with individuals. Jesus asked this of his disciples because he knew it was time to begin to prepare them for his departure, and they needed to say it out loud, that Jesus is the messiah, and they knew this because of their experiences traveling with him.

That is something that my travels and my privilege of serving so many different communities taught me too. This awesome gift of serving God in a variety of places with myriad people having their own personal experience of Jesus has strengthened my answer to Jesus’ question as well, “Who do you say I am?”

As most of you know, my kids go to the church I grew up in for Sunday school during the school year. It is the church I began attending at 8 years old. I was confirmed there, married there, had my first communion there. My mom and grandparents had their funeral services at this church, and my children were baptized there. It is a community of people I love. It is home for me, and I am glad the community is there for my children as well. However, I am also glad that my children have the experience of worshiping at different churches, that they get to experience how different communities get to answer Jesus’ question, “who do you say I am?” because each community has a slightly different answer to this question based on their history, their community, their background. And we see this in the Bible too. Even the New Testament does not paint a uniform portrait of Christ. Not only do we have four very different gospels, each unique in their individual understandings of the meaning of Jesus’ ministry, but there are also twenty-three additional books that share varying views of Jesus. Put Hebrews and James side by side, and you will see the understanding of Jesus and who he is, what he came to do is very different in each book. Even the 13 letters attributed to Paul adapt the function and significance of Jesus Christ depending on the circumstances that need to be addressed in each congregation

by Paul. The very idea that each gospel writer had a different long answer to “who do you say I am?” and Paul gave extremely different explanations of the messiah and what it means to be a follower of Christ to different communities with different needs is important to remember.

It is common for a person, like my family, to worship with the same community their entire life. This is not a bad thing at all. But there is something that we need to be aware of, and that is the answer to this question, “who do you say I am?” When we spend our entire lives answering that question in one context we begin to believe that our version of the messiah is the only, or the right, version of the messiah. We tend to create Jesus in our own image and judge when we hear another community that experiences Jesus in a different way. This question is so important because Jesus comes to us where we are. We experience Jesus to fill our brokenness, or needs, our deep desires. That’s why we have the Nordic portraits of Jesus all over the place – the long blond wispy hair, the blue eyes, the light skin portraits of Jesus. We have one hanging in the main office here. We know that skin tones in the Middle East are much darker. We know that Jesus probably had dark thick hair, but there is something about seeing him in our image that makes him more approachable. This is why when I served on the south side my congregation had a debate about removing the mural of the Nordic Jesus that hung in the front of the church and was placed there by the Dutch community that founded the congregation before the make up of the neighborhood became more African American. This is why Father Pflieger’s church, St. Sabani, has a large portrait of Jesus with dark skin, hair made up of tight curls, and his hand held out to show the holes in his palms. This is what hangs at the back of the altar, the answer to “who do you say I am?” is different in that poorer African-American community than it is here in Norridge.

There is diversity in our experience of who the messiah is today just like it was when the New Testament writers were sharing their experience of answering this same question. After all, God was known well before people started writing their experiences down. They experience of God and the living messiah in Jesus was experienced firsthand well before the Bible was formed and printed for the masses. We experience Christ well before we can answer the question, “who do you say I am?”

Because “Who do you say that I am?” is at the same time, “who will you say that you are?”

That's the rub of this question, the heart of its difficulty. If it we only had to provide an answer to Jesus' question of *his* identity, that would be one thing. However, answering the question of Jesus' identity is also having to give voice to our own.

Who you say Jesus is is who you have decided to be. You can't answer this question without revealing who you are. Or we could switch it around. Who you are reveals who you have decided Jesus to be. Jesus' question is not a test. It's not about getting the answer right. It's the moment when you come face-to-face with your own commitment, your own discipleship, your own identity. It's the moment when you have to admit to what extent how you follow Jesus actually connects with some sort of confession of who you believe Jesus to be. (Korline Lewis, commentary – paraphrased).

Have you noticed that there's not a lot of correlation these days between claims about Jesus and choices as to how lives are lived, whether that is individuals, churches, or institutions of the church? But "Who do you say that I am?" is not just an issue of integrity or an example of hypocrisy. It's being willing to risk being known for what you believe and your experience of Jesus while at the same time not judging other for theirs.

Jesus needed to know that his disciples could give an answer to the question, "who do you say I am?" before he could begin sharing the next phase of his ministry – the journey to this death.

How we answer the question, "who do you say I am?" should make us reflect and maybe even feel challenged. And if it doesn't, we may have fallen into the trap of answering the wrong question, putting it in the wrong order. The question is, "Who do you say I am? and Jesus knows it's one of the hardest questions to ask -- which is why he asks it in the first place.

Amen