

“Who Am I?”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’ And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’ He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, ‘Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of God with the holy angels.’

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An elderly nun who was living in a convent next to a construction site noticed the coarse language of the construction workers and thought she’d better spend some time with them to correct their ways. She decided to take her lunch, sit with the workers, and talk with them. So, she put her sandwich in a brown paper bag and walked over to the spot where the men were eating. She walked up to the group and with a big smile said, "And

do you men know Jesus Christ?" They shook their heads and looked at each other very confused. One of the workers looked up into the steelworks and yelled out, "Anybody up there know Jesus Christ?" One of the steelworkers yelled down, "Why?" The worker yelled back up, "Cuz his wife's here with his lunch."¹

It's easy to confuse a person's identity with someone else, isn't it? I wouldn't be surprised if most of us in this room have, at one time or another, been mistaken for someone else. During seminary, I was often told by the other theology nerds that I looked like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a famous German pastor who'd been killed as an anti-Nazi dissident back in 1945. The other day, clearly thinking me to be someone else, the receptionist at one of the local senior residences asked me how my baby was doing. In large groups, I'm regularly approached by people asking if they know me because I just look so familiar. Maybe that's happened to you? It certainly happened to Jesus.

Talking with his friends one day, Jesus asked them who the people thought he was. Apparently, some thought he was actually John the Baptist, who'd been executed by the king; and some thought he was Elijah, a prophet from the Hebrew Bible who'd been dead for centuries; and others just thought Jesus was another of the dead prophets. It shouldn't really surprise us that there were so many different answers to the question of Jesus' identity. In fact, "the New Testament does not paint a uniform portrait of [Jesus]. Not only do we have four very different Gospels, each remarkably unique in their individual understandings of the meaning of Jesus' ministry, there are twenty-three additional books that articulate varying views of Jesus. Even the thirteen letters attributed to Paul adapt the function and significance of Jesus depending on the circumstances that need to be addressed in each congregation."²

We Christians don't have a uniform portrait of Jesus, but most of us have an opinion about who he was. Most other religions have an opinion about who Jesus was too and they range from teacher, to prophet, to holy man,

¹ "The Nun's Lunch," johnjudyc.blogspot.com, March 10, 2010:
<https://johnjudyc.blogspot.com/2010/03/nuns-lunch.html>.

² Karoline Lewis. "Who Do You Say That I Am?" Workingpreacher.org, September 11, 2018:
<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5220>.

to one of many incarnations of the divine, to Messiah. Even nonreligious people have an opinion about who Jesus was, so it shouldn't surprise us that the people who actually met Jesus during his ministry couldn't agree either.

After hearing these different answers, Jesus asked his friends, "Who do *you* say that I am?" Peter, always the first to speak, responded, "You are the Messiah." Seems like the right answer, doesn't it? But this morning, I wonder: who do *you* say that Jesus is? Think about that for a moment...

For centuries the Hebrew people had been awaiting the Messiah's coming. For centuries they had suffered under one foreign occupation after another, after another. For centuries they had longed for the restoration of the great monarchy of kings David and Solomon, for freedom from oppressive governments, for a return to the longed-for prosperity they'd known before the Assyrians occupation, before the Babylonian occupation, before the Roman occupation. The Messiah, would accomplish this—lead them forward into the bright light of a new day. *That* is who Peter, one of Jesus' closest friends, thought Jesus was. We know different, don't we?

Jesus didn't deny being the Messiah, but as we heard read in Mark's gospel, he went on to teach his friends that the Messiah would actually be rejected, suffer, die, and rise again. Well, that didn't sound like the Messiah that Peter expected, so he took Jesus to task. "Get behind me, Satan!" Jesus cried. "This *is* who the Messiah is," he continued, "and if you want to be my followers then deny yourselves and take up your cross and follow me."

Here's the rub, folks: in answering Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am," we are also saying who we as Christians will be. The word Christian is a compound word formed from two Greek words, *Christos* (anointed) and *tian* (little one). When we call ourselves Christians we are calling ourselves "little Christs." What we say about who Jesus was is also supposed to be true of who we are and who we will become.

One commentator reminds us that "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."³ Everybody has an opinion about Jesus, but those of us who claim to be his followers, who claim to be Christians, are actually supposed to live into our confessions – our claims about him – and to walk in his way.

A few moments ago, I invited us to consider who Jesus is. Now, for the follow-up question: based on who you think Jesus is, who are we to be as his followers? In other words, if *this* is who Jesus is, then *this* is who I'm called to be. How does what we believe about Jesus, inform who we are and who we are becoming? Think about it for a moment...

We are a noncreedal church and we value individual experiences of the Holy. I regularly stress the importance of right action over right belief. But beliefs *are* important. Our beliefs about Jesus, our confessions about who Jesus was and is, dictate who we, his followers, are called to be. That's what it means to call ourselves Christians, little Christs. Who do *we* say that he is? That is who we too are meant to be in the world. May it be so. Amen.

³ Ibid.