

**“Who Do You Say That I Am?”**

**Matthew 16.13–2**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 21 August 2005**

“Religion is at its best when it *asks* questions.” Those words come from Karen Armstrong, the noted British observer of world religions. And so, in good rabbinic form, Jesus asks Peter the question, “Who do you say that I am?”

Even in Jesus’ day, people said different things about him, whether it was being Elijah or Jeremiah or John the Baptist. So, our confusion about Jesus’ true identity is nothing new. Peter seems to have arrived at the right answer to the \$64,000 question, saying “You are the messiah.”

You’ll notice that Jesus doesn’t come right out and agree with Peter. He doesn’t say, “Yep, you hit the nail on the head...I am the messiah!” Instead, he perpetuates what scholars call “the messianic secret,” a recurring motif, especially in Matthew’s gospel, in which Jesus not only fails to blow his own horn, but doesn’t want the word to get out. It’s not exactly a great evangelism strategy!

Now you may think that Peter’s proclamation that Jesus is the messiah means that Jesus was “fully human and fully divine.” But that idea or concept of Jesus’ identity didn’t emerge into orthodoxy (or right belief) until the fourth century with the Council of Nicaea, which declared that Jesus was “of one substance” with God the creator.

What did the word “Messiah” mean to Peter and to Jesus? The Hebrew word is *Meshiach*, which means “anointed,” as when one is anointed as a king. David, the great monarch was *meshiach*. To the ancient Hebrew mind, it did not convey divinity. Let me say that again: to Jesus and to Peter, saying that Jesus was the Messiah (or *Christos* in Greek) did not imply divinity, but rather divinely inspired earthly leadership.

Does that mean that Jesus was not divine? No, it doesn’t mean that. Does it mean that neither Peter nor Jesus thought of Jesus as being divine? Probably. That would have been a dramatic reversal of thought for any observant Jew, and both Peter and Jesus were observant Jews. In fact it would have been heretical to say that anyone but YHWH was God.

Minimally, we see Jesus as a prophet and as messiah, God’s anointed one. Maximally, we perceive Jesus as being one with God the Creator and God the Spirit. Even if Jesus’ own self-perception did not include divinity, it does not preclude us from making that assertion.

None of us can say, with absolute certainty that Jesus was divine. (We can, of course, make a statement of faith that Jesus was “of one substance” with God the Creator. So, what can we know about Jesus?

Much of what we know about the Jesus of history comes from the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. (Synoptic means “seeing together,” and these three viewpoints are similar on many issues.) The gospel of John is often regarded more as an interpretation of Jesus by the community of John, the beloved disciple, and it was the latest of the gospels to be recorded. Most scholars regard it as having far less of the historical Jesus than the synoptics. Does that mean that John’s gospel unimportant? Certainly not! It’s just not the best source for uncovering the historical Jesus: what he said and what he did.

We can know that he was human. Jewish peasant, lived in the first century. From what we read in the gospels (both inside and outside the Biblical canon) we can be fairly certain that he was a healer and a person with an incredibly close connection to God. And his message was summarized in the phrase, “the kingdom of God,” meaning what the world

would be like if God were directly and immediately in charge. It is a reign of compassion and of justice for the oppressed.

If the kingdom of God were fully present in the world, we wouldn't see kids living in trash heaps in Guatemala City; we wouldn't see oppression of women in Afghanistan; we wouldn't see racism in the United States; we wouldn't see war anywhere. But, as it is, we see the kingdom breaking into the world only partially: in the peaceful overthrow of apartheid, in the velvet revolution in the Czech Republic; or in the IRA abandoning the use of violence. Thank God for signs of hope...the hope that let's us know that an alternative future is possible, if we will work with God to bring it in.

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I don't know if you've noticed, but I still haven't given a direct answer to the question, "Who do you say that I am?" And that's intentional. In fact, I'm not going to provide a definitive response to the question. Our church give each of us freedom of conscience in the way we interpret scripture, and that's a tradition that goes far back into our Congregational past. In some ways, it might be easier for some of you if I just dictated an orthodox line, telling you that you have to think that Jesus is fully human and fully divine. Full stop. End of story. Life isn't that tidy, and neither is theology. So, you're not off the hook.

The answer is perhaps less important than grappling with the question, for whatever our answer, it is contained in a mystery that none of us can fathom fully. And the journey – the grappling with the question – is where we build up our theological muscles and calluses. And that kind of spiritual fitness is what each of us needs to work on.

Personally, I don't care that much whether people believe that Jesus was divine or human, because I don't think God cares much about our opinion about Jesus. God is not some kind of cosmic schoolmistress who is obsessed with whether we've learned by rote our times tables of our church doctrine. The bottom line is that God knows with certainty who Jesus was and who the Christ of faith is; what we can offer is our wrestling: all else is conjecture.

What's important to me is following Jesus to the best of our abilities. Does that mean we have to be Mediterranean Jewish peasants? Of course not. Does it mean that we need to become itinerant preachers and healers who leave our families behind? Not necessarily. Does it mean that we, as disciples or students, need to learn all we can about who Jesus was, what he said, and what he taught? What do you think?

Jesus said a lot...and some of it was even recorded...in the oral tradition of his day. (We don't have anything that was written by Jesus himself, but was written down by the gospel writers roughly 35 to as many as 90 years after the crucifixion.)

I'm going to condense a lot here, since I couldn't very well preach on everything Jesus said this morning. Here is what Marcus Borg says: "Two key words enable us to glimpse what was most central to Jesus: spirit and compassion...They disclose what was important to him...For Jesus compassion was the central quality of God and the central moral quality of a life centered in God...For Jesus, compassion was not simply an individual virtue, but a sociopolitical paradigm expressing his alternative vision of human life in community, a vision of life embodied in the movement that came into existence around him."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Marcus Borg. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, (SF: HarperSanFrancisco, 1985), p. 46-47.

We can say a lot more about Jesus. We can claim that he is our savior, our Lord, our redeemer, the messiah or Christ, and we can claim that he is the incarnation of the true God.

For me, the question not so much who we say Jesus is, but how we take our ideas about Jesus and put them into action. Samuel Taylor Coleridge once wrote that “Christianity is not a theory or speculation, but a life; not a philosophy of life, but a life and a living process.” And the Christian life, claims Marcus Borg, “is about a relationship with God that involves us in a journey of transformation.”<sup>2</sup> And the glorious thing is that we are on that journey together.

And still, I think it’s important for each of us to pose and grapple with the question: “Who do you say that I am?”



Being part of a faith tradition that asks more questions than perhaps it answers can sometimes be a difficult, though spiritually mature, way to be religious. I’d ask that you take heart and journey with us and hear these words from Rainer Maria Rilke, the poet and mystic.

“Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves...The point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 3