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**Proper 16 August 23, 2020**  
**Matthew 16:13-20**

Who do you say that I am?

I have long understood this question to be a central one for Christians. Who do you say that Jesus is? Knowing what others think of him, who do you confess him to be? I've consistently read it as a revelation of Jesus' divinity, as Peter names him Messiah, son of God.

And it is. It is all of that.

But this morning I want to ask: what if it's also the inverse of that? What if for us today this story offers more than just a reinforcement of Jesus' divinity? What if it invites us into a deeper understanding of Jesus' *humanity*?

In its abridged lectionary form I'm not sure we can get all the way there, so let's back up a couple of chapters. Because this chunk of Scripture is part of a larger turning point in Matthew's Gospel. For about ten chapters, Jesus has been teaching and healing and teaching and healing with little interruption. Yes, his cousin John has been arrested, which seems to have mobilized Jesus to take up John's work of traveling and teaching in the first place. But after that, things are pretty stable.

Then Jesus goes home.

Ask any college student: the first trip home is often a mind trip. You've been off learning and sharing and meeting people, growing and inevitably changing some, and then you come home. By and large people aren't interested in all the great things you've learned and done, unless you're going to come home and do great things for them. You're still the same little Josh who lost those clay birds that one time. At the best of times, it can test your sense of yourself. And then - well, after Jesus gets home, the chronology gets tricky for the next bit. There's a little bit of "flash forward, flash back" in what comes next, in both Matthew and Mark. The story picks up with "about that time, Herod started to hear stories about Jesus and to be afraid that Jesus was John the Baptizer raised from the dead, and oh by the way I didn't tell you that story, yeah, John died, he got his head chopped off by Herod to make his wife happy and impress a bunch of his friends, so yeah anyway when Jesus heard that he went away." It is not Matthew or Mark's finest moment as a narrator.

But the best we can piece it together, it sounds like Jesus might have gotten the news of John's death right after his hometown refused to acknowledge him as a prophet, let alone see him as Messiah. And things just keep unspooling. He goes away to a deserted place when he hears of his cousin's death, and he's bombarded by people who want healing. He moves to another place - and it happens again. He gets in his first fight with the Pharisees and scribes. He goes away again, and he has the confrontation with the Syro-Phoenician woman, the story we heard last Sunday, where Jesus may or may not have called her a dog. From there, every time he moves, he continues to be followed by crowds begging for healing and food, and by Pharisees and Sadducees wanting to see his credentials for the work he's doing.

And then he finally lands in Caesarea Philippi, with just his disciples, and I imagine he must have been exhausted. He has not yet had time to grieve for John, the time he knew he needed

and tried to take. He has not yet had time to process how soon John's fate might be his. He has been treated like a first-century vending machine, and it has taken a toll. The patience he showed in his teaching during those early chapters seems to have worn thin.

So I wonder: is this conversation not so much another lesson for the disciples, as it is a man who desperately needs to know that someone sees him for who he really is? Is there a tape in Jesus' head playing back the conversation with the Pharisees, the insult to the Syro-Phoenician woman, the impatience with his disciples' learning curve? Does Jesus' experience of being fully human include regret?

Does it include the experience of wondering if you are even close to being the person you set out to be?

When Jesus asks his friends, "Who do others say that the Son of Man is?" - what if he's not softballing his way into a quiz for Peter? What if he's checking whether they will tell him the truth - whether they are in a place where he can be vulnerable and even need something from them? What if "who do you say that I am?" isn't about the disciples learning at all? What if Jesus is having doubts about whether he can be the Messiah his people need him to be? What if this moment doesn't foreshadow the certainty of the ascension so much as the agony of Gethsemane? After all, that's where Jesus is headed from here. He'll get a moment of transfiguration on the mountain top, but it's all downhill from there, right to his own arrest and crucifixion.

What if Jesus is genuinely asking the people he trusts to know him best to tell him again who he is - because \*he\* genuinely needs to hear it? What if he isn't sure he can face the cross without it?

What if Jesus naming Simon as Peter, the rock, isn't a gold star from teacher but the best way Jesus knew to show his gratitude for how clearly Peter sees him?

And what if this is still part of what Jesus is asking us for with these questions today?

It's a worthwhile effort to sit down and puzzle out a personal theological answer: to decide that we are personally ready to name Jesus as Messiah, as God. It's an important use of time to settle into imaginative prayer with Jesus, to meditate on what this moment must have been like for him and to see just how human he really was.

My heart breaks with recognition as I picture this exhausted, questioning Jesus in my sanctified imagination: this Jesus who needed his friends to remind him who he really was. I see his divinity, and I see his full humanity. His vulnerability reminds me of my own, and in that imagining I am less alone in the world.

But Jesus does not only live in my imagination, or in yours. Jesus lives and breathes and walks among us today; Christ's body now is us, as Paul reminds us in Romans. So as important as it is to connect with the Jesus of Scripture, the Jesus of prayer, it means little if I can't look at my neighbor and see Christ in their face as well.

I think most of us would like to say that we can do that. We know that's part of the command to love our neighbors as ourselves. We can quote Jesus saying that whatever we do to the least of his siblings here on earth, we do to him. I think we mean it in theory.

But if we can, what then? If we truly understood that that child in the cage was Jesus, would we leave him there? If we truly understood that the man standing on the corner and begging was Jesus, would we leave him there? If we truly understood that each person we encounter and each person we avoid is not just themselves, but is also Jesus waiting for us to see him, would we leave our financial systems set up to keep helping the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, to keep incarcerating black and brown youth as adults at younger ages? Would we leave each other to our own devices?

What would we be willing to risk if we really believed that Jesus was waiting, longing to be seen, in the poor, the prisoner, the sick, and the stranger? What would we be willing to do to meet the stranger and call them beloved?

I am a little afraid - more than a little, sometimes - to stand in front of this vulnerable Jesus and name him as my Messiah, because I am a little afraid - if I am honest - of what he might tell me next. Who will Jesus tell me I am, if I stand still long enough to hear it?

Peter got seen in a big way, and everything Jesus promised came true. And I imagine there were moments when it was pretty great to know that Jesus picked you to be the rock on which he would build his community, but it also got Peter killed just like Jesus.

But here is what makes it possible for me to try to take that risk each day: Throughout my life, I have been changed by people looking at me and naming something in me that I don't yet see, that maybe I \*am not\* yet - but I could be. Every holy risk I have ever taken, I have been able to take because someone with the eyes of Jesus has told me I am a person who could do it. Sometimes the voice comes from a dear friend, sometimes from a new acquaintance. On rare occasions it has come straight from Jesus to my heart, but usually I need an intermediary to hear it well.

So today I invite you: pursue that kind of sight, that kind of hearing. Pursue this kind of relationship with Jesus, absolutely, but also with your beloveds and with those you barely know. Make room to be named and changed simply in the attempt. See what Jesus will call out of you, to make this world closer to what it could be.