



Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 23, 2020

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony

Reflection: Who Do You Say I Am

Who do you say that I am? These last few weeks leading up to my ordination this past Sunday have brought up some very interesting conversations about this very question. Over the past few weeks people have been wondering when they could begin to call me Pastor Tony and even asking would I go by the initials PT much the same way Pastor Chris also goes by PC. However, Pastor Chris was oh, so quick to remind everyone who asked this question or prematurely used this formal address in error, that I wasn't "Pastor Tony" yet, at least not until my ordination was complete – as evidenced by this sign that was on my chair for worship this past Sunday.

Identity is important, and in our Gospel text for today we take a deeper dive into the identity of Jesus. Who do you say that I am? This is the all too important question that Jesus asks the disciples, and that Peter actually answers correctly. And while he gets it right today, we know the story and know that it won't last – Peter will go on to put his foot in his mouth later on, but for today at least he gets it correct.

In today's Gospel we find Jesus wondering aloud what the crowds are saying about him, but more importantly, what the disciples think about him. It's another way of him saying, "Why are you following me?" "Why have you left everything you know?" "Who am I to you?"

Today I also think it's worthwhile asking ourselves, "Why are you here?" "Why have you chosen to follow Jesus?" "Why are you on this path?" To understand Jesus' identity is also to understand why and how we choose to follow Jesus in the first place. The other question for us is also how we might begin to recognize God already working in our midst, because the problem is, I think, in our tendency to only look to the spectacular and stunning to see God's presence. But what if God's presence is more subtle than such fireworks? What if our simple assertion that Jesus is the Messiah is more powerful but quieter than the noise of a world trying to pull us away from God.

Peter uses the word Messiah, a word that means someone who is expected, someone who comes to fulfill a promise, to bring God's love to each one of us. In the gift of the Holy Spirit we're all given the ability to recognize Jesus as the Son of God and receive his love, but sometimes I think we mistakenly believe that God's presence only comes to us in grand and glorious ways, when in reality, God reveals God's self to us in more ways like whispers.

Through Jesus, we get to have a relationship with God, and the bottom line at the end of the day is – Jesus wants to know, "Who am I...to you?" But take heart – because if you're having trouble definitively answering this question, then just remember that even Peter, Jesus' right hand man, couldn't fully explain it. Even after years of living in close relationship with Jesus, after following him, and experiencing Jesus' interactions first-hand with people day in and day out, Peter still didn't fully get it right.

And yet, in looking at Peter's inability to articulate what he believed and in his stumbling to live into what he had hoped to believe, maybe you and I can also find the courage and hope necessary to join our voices with those early disciples and others in this church and around the world and give our hearts more fully to Jesus.

Because to be honest, my own answer to the question, "Who do you say I am" keeps growing and changing, and I bet yours does too and will continue to do so, and that's okay, because that's what this journey of faith is all about. That's what believing is about. It's a process – a journey of growing into a deeper realization and understanding and relationship with the one who offers us a life transforming relationship with God.

Today as we worship together, we affirm that we believe in Jesus Christ, who calls us to give away what we have; to heal the world; to love our enemies; to make audacious promises like the ones asked in ordination vows. And as we celebrate Holy Communion in just a little while, we're reminded that Christ gave up everything – even his own life. Jesus poured out his blood on the cross so that our sins would be forgiven. And this Good News my friends is encouraging. This truth is our comfort. This act of love is what chases away sadness, disappointment, and any uncertainty that God sent his Son to die for us.

See – Peter, you, me – we're all in the same boat. We've been given God's gift of faith, and we can trust that God's promises are real in our lives and therefore lives according to this hope of life everlasting. And even when we mess it up, get it wrong, and utterly fail—our loving God is there with arms wide open. Arms that were once pinned to a cross, now reach out in a loving embrace to reassure us of the fulfillment of God's promises. For all the times we get it wrong, Jesus got it right. For all the times we utterly fail, Jesus succeeded. For all the times we completely mess it up, Jesus completely fixed it once and for all.

At yet the same time we know that there is so much more to do than we seem able to do, and that even our best efforts and most heartfelt attempts will fall short, not living as deeply or truly into our confession as we should, and at times getting confused or scared about what that confession means. And yet there are moments when we confess, when we do something right, when we perceive more of God's purpose than we did before, when things come together if only for a brief moment, and when we sense God's spirit at work in us and among us. And it's at those moments that it's important to pause and give thanks.

Perhaps what we need most right now is to take a look around our lives and see what's going right. Notice and name where God is already at work. Lift up, celebrate, and give thanks for those things where we sense the presence of the living God.

Here at Ascension maybe it's the blessing box out by the street that continues to be filled and repeatedly visited by our neighbors in need. Or maybe it's our musicians who continue to lift our hearts in songs of praise while we live in the midst of a pandemic and for the time being are unable to sing along. Or maybe it's in the gift of a trusting and faithful community who followed the leading of the Holy Spirit and lifted up a servant among them in order to extend God's love and mission in the world.

I could go on and on – the staff of Ascension who continue to make bold and creative ministry connections in a time of separation, a capable council making faithful decisions to tend and grow this faith community, members whose generosity continues to support local and global mission partners, along with the countless volunteers who make it possible for this weekly worship experience to take place. Big or small, obvious or easy to overlook, there are places in our lives where God's presence is evident, and our confession is clear.

But this isn't to suggest that we overlook all that still needs to be done – the important issues of our day, the vital nature of our confession in our actions as well as our words, or the many who need us to stand up for them more boldly than before. Our Gospel reading today gives us a chance to give thanks that we might be open to what God will do with us and for us and through us next.

My hope and prayer for you, and us, and all of God's people is that we will see God at work in our lives and in our community more clearly. My hope is that we will begin to see and sense and hear our own confessions of Christ as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. And while we won't be perfect at it, or always fully understand it, or even live into what we confess – but we will nevertheless speak and act in ways that are only possible because we're empowered not by flesh and blood, but by God. So, empowered by the spirit of God, may you be bold in all that you say and do as you confess Christ crucified and resurrected for a world in need, and may it be to the great glory of God. Thanks be to God! Amen.