



Sunday August 27, 2023
Matthew 16:13-20 (Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompañado

If I were to ask you who you say Jesus is, I wonder what you would say? But wait, even if you're feeling confident and sure, I don't want you to answer just yet.

I think many of you would be tempted to fall back on the familiar religious language we all know so well, like the Creeds – you know the stuff we can almost recite in our sleep. And yet, there would be others who would be tempted not to answer the question at all. Dodge and evade. Avoiding eye contact, or shuffling your feet, coughing, glancing anxiously at each other. Desperately hoping that someone else will answer first or hoping that if you just sit silent for long enough the question will pass.

Regardless of where you fall on this spectrum, for the moment, I'd like us to just wait awhile. Let the question linger a bit longer. *"Who do you say that Jesus is?"*

In seminary this was one of the first major theological questions we were tasked with answering, and let me tell you, without simply falling back to the safety of our creedal statements, it's much, much harder to answer with any sense of conviction and integrity than one would think.

In this week's Gospel reading, Jesus invites his disciples, and us, to answer this very question, *"Who do you say that I am?"* In other words, *"Who am I to you?"* *"Where do I stand in your priority list?"* *"What do I mean to you?"*

And just to be completely clear – Jesus is asking this basic and yet pointed and foundational question of everyone – every member, visitor, volunteer, staff member, and pastor. Jesus' question is one that every follower of Jesus must answer, and not just once, but again and again and again throughout our lives: Who do we say that Jesus is – for us and for the world?

We all believe *something* about God. But it can vary greatly. We can believe different things about the one God we all worship. Not only that, but our understanding of God can change over our lifetime. In fact, it should change, as we grow in our faith. But the reason why this question is so important, I think, is because how we answer it directly affects how we live out our faith, and how we live out our lives.

For example, if you believe that God is like a divine scorekeeper, keeping track of all the good and bad that you've done, then you'll probably live your life very carefully, and rather fearfully –



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trying to do good when you can and trying to avoid sinning as much as possible while hoping that you come out ahead at the end.

If, on the other hand, you believe that God is all-accepting and welcoming, but distant and waiting patiently in Heaven for you to get there, then you may not really worry about your good deeds and your sins, and whether or not you're pleasing God with your life.

But it goes even deeper than that. Because what we believe about God affects all kinds of other things. Like how we pray. If we believe that God is distant, and simply watching events unfold in our world with little participation or influence, then we won't spend a lot of time asking God to change the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

What we believe about God matters. If we think of God as an unsympathetic judge, then we might also avoid prayer, because we wouldn't dare ask God for anything because we believe he doesn't care to hear our plea anyway. Then again, if we think of God as a loving parent, we will turn to God when we need help or advice. If we think of God as a friend, we will spend time in conversation with God just talking about our day.

How we pray, in other words, depends very much on what we believe about God. But what we believe about God affects not only our prayer-life, it also affects how we face trials in our life. What we believe about God affects how we navigate our way through difficult circumstances. Do we believe that God created these challenges? Do we blame God for them? Do we believe that God has imposed them on us to test our faith? Or do we believe that God may be allowing them to help us grow in our faith? Do we believe that God is with us in all our struggles? Do we believe that God can bring good out of them?

What we believe about God affects how we approach every aspect of our life, including how we make our way through these turbulent times.

So, what we believe about God matters, and quite possibly more than anything else in life. That's probably why Jesus initiated the conversation in today's gospel reading. Because Jesus knew that what the disciples thought of him would affect how they would live their lives going forward. Their understanding of God mattered. It mattered then. And it matters now.



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Jesus begins by asking them an easy question, “*Who do people say that I am?*” Well, some say John the Baptist, they answered, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. It was an easy question, because they were just sharing what they heard, rather than what they believed. This wouldn’t have been a difficult question for any of us to answer, or anyone else for that matter. But then Jesus asked his disciples the harder question, the more important question: “*Who do you say that I am?*” Some of us might even think this as an easy question, too.

Jesus is our Savior. Our Lord. Our Redeemer. Our King. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. We all know that. We know the answer to this question. We’ve been to Sunday School. We’ve sat in church. We’ve read our Bible. We’ve listened to sermons. We know this stuff. We’ve heard it so many times before. Except, I believe that Jesus wants more than just our pat Sunday School answer. Jesus doesn’t want us to answer with our head, he wants us to answer with our heart – and more importantly – with our life.

So, who do you say that Jesus is? If Jesus himself were to ask you this question, how would you answer it? What do you believe about Jesus, really? What do you believe about God, really? And is your life reflecting your answer?

But there’s another piece of this question that’s just as important to think about. Because to me, just as important as *what* our answer is to Jesus’ question, is *when* and *where* we answer it.

What do I mean by this? I mean this question demands an answer but not just while sitting here in a sanctuary during worship. But also, in a hospital room. And not just in our homes, but also in a funeral home. And not just on Sunday morning, but during those days and nights when things are going great and also when we struggle with daily life.

Who do you say that Jesus is? And I’m not asking you to recite the Creed, but who do you say Jesus is in your relationships, your work, your bank account, your parenting, your friendships, your time, your energy, your prayer life, your politics, your welcome, and all the rest. *Who do you really say Jesus is?*

This question demands an answer, and not just when life is going well, but even more when life is falling apart. That’s when it really matters. That’s when what we truly believe about God matters. And when the answer isn’t just words, but when it’s life.



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My friends, I believe that today's Gospel is calling all of us to think about this question again and to answer it with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. I believe that today's Gospel is inviting us into a time to struggle again with who we believe Jesus is, and who we believe God is. I believe Jesus is inviting us into a time to wrestle with what we believe God is doing in our lives and in our world today – and with what we are being called to do as followers of Jesus.

In the midst of all that's going on in our world today, Jesus invites us to confess our faith and trust in Him once again, believing, with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, that he is the Savior of the world, the son of the living God. The One who promises to calm our every storm, who offers us a peace that surpasses all understanding, who desires to hear our every prayer, and who assures us that he will be with us always, even to the end of the age. That is who Jesus is. And for Jesus, we say, thanks be to God. Amen.