

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Questions. Some are funny, while others are a bit more challenging. Some of them can seem downright ridiculous, and others, relentless. And then, there are those questions that catch us completely off guard and stop us in our tracks. Life is full of questions. What's for dinner tonight? Why does Hawaiian pizza contain Canadian bacon? Why do we only have two choices for President but fifty for Miss America? How come you never read the headline "psychic wins lottery?" At a movie theater, which armrest is yours? Is there ever really a day that mattresses *aren't* on sale? Why does the word lisp have an "s" in it? Have you seen my keys? Is there any difference between party sunny and party cloudy? Dad, why can't I have a boyfriend? Do you have any idea how much you spent on Starbucks this month? Okay, so maybe a few of these are just in my life, nevertheless, questions surround us and there's a common thread to every question – they beg for answers.

"Who do you say that I am?" It is the question that beckons us this morning. Brothers and sisters, as we begin *our* journey together, I think it's important that you know a little bit more about me and my journey of faith.

While you may know me best as Ascension's Director of Faith Formation there are many other identities that I claim: I am a husband and father, a son, a brother, a friend, a seminarian, and most notably a very broken Christian. I don't love God enough or pray enough, I don't read my bible enough or share my faith enough, I don't trust enough, and I'm definitely not committed enough. I've been told that I'm full of integrity; that I'm kind, sincere, and passionate, and yet I often see myself as disorganized, impractical, and a bit too intense. I'm doubtful and faithful at the same time. I can be adventurous and inspiring, and at times rebellious and unruly. I'm a curious mix of introverted and extroverted, and I have failed at more things than I care to admit. I've been bullied, fired, dumped, and lied to. I have ADD and gray hairs at 43, and if you've ever met my wife then you know I definitely married up. My life and my journey of faith are a combination of messy and beautiful! And as strange as this may sound, I would not change any of it.

Now . . . I'm guessing that wasn't quite the opening you were expecting, but here's the thing, I am not about to apologize for who I am, because if we are going to walk this journey together then you should know the truth about *who* you are walking with. As a matter of fact, it is Jesus in the Gospel of John, who reminds us that it is that truth that will make us free.

Today's Gospel places us in the middle of the story between Jesus and the disciples where Jesus openly questions what the crowds are saying about him, more importantly, he wants to know what the *disciples* think about him. What Jesus wants to know is why they've left everything they know to follow him; who do *they* say that he is. It is not enough though, to simply imagine Jesus asking *others* these questions. We have to imagine Jesus asking *us* these questions . . . and then we have to take Jesus serious enough to answer in a way that articulates both what we hear and what we believe.

Why are you *here*? Why are you on *this path*? Who do *you* say that Jesus is?

Across time people have always had plenty to say about Jesus. Some recognized his power and imagined him as the one sent to rescue Israel – the Messiah for whom they desperately longed. Some imagine Jesus as the one who solves all of life's problems – the great Tylenol for whatever pains they suffer. Others see Jesus as the *Mr. Fix It* of the spiritual world – sanitizing lives, and removing suffering, and hardship if they would only pray hard enough.

God, however, gives us different words. The story of Jesus in the Bible is a story of unimaginable love. The story of Jesus is also about suffering and death. It is a story of failure, weakness, suffering and death on a cross. It is the story of the one who died for the unlovable. It is the story of the one whose body was pierced for you and me. But God did not stop there – to the cross he adds resurrection. To failure he adds words for you and for me, a message spoken over us in Baptism.

You are chosen. You are *my child*. You are the one I love.

God's words for us today are words of hope and victory in the midst of failure, weakness, suffering, and death. We are loved, no matter what! God's victory is not seen in power, wealth, and the lack of suffering. Rather, God's victory comes in spite of, and in the very presence of failure, weakness, suffering, and death.

The good news for us today is that Jesus is building his church upon people who don't have it all together. People like you and me who have great intentions, but don't always quite follow through.

So, as we continue on this journey together take heart – for you are in good company. With all our faults and imperfections; with all our successes and failures; in the midst of all our joys and emotional scars; with all our weaknesses and brokenness; you and I are just like those first disciples who Jesus questioned. You are God's beloved, God's favored, the disciple God calls by name, the one Jesus prefers to hang with, eat with, play with, talk with, cry with, and laugh with. You are the one whom the holy God of heaven and earth longs to spend time with. You are all this and so much more. You always have been, and you always will be – children of God.

As we search for words that speak to our faith and we attempt to answer Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" We come face to face with Jesus' promise to Peter – that even in the midst of struggling to understand the full meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus will build his church upon people who wrestle to understand it all. Jesus sends us into the world to spread the good news and assure all of God's children that we are loved, we are forgiven, and we are accepted. We stand together looking into the future reminded of our identity as children of God, and we live in the assurance of the Holy Spirit, which *can and will* give us the power to face the uncertainty that the future holds.

My dear friends. In the end, *our lives* must speak louder, more truthfully, and more effectively than our words. We are called to live a life rich with love for God and *all* of God's people, one that loves the other as much as ourselves, one that stands up against oppression and actively pursues justice and peace. The answer to Jesus' question today is rooted in the life that we live – this my friends, may just be the best answer any of us can give to Jesus' everlasting question: Who do *you* say that I am?

~Amen