

Who Do You Say?

August 24, 2014

Matthew 16:13-20

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesare'a Philip'pi, he asked his disciples, "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Eli'jah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." 20 Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

As we enter into our understanding today it is helpful to know a few things about the Gospel of Matthew. Most scholars divide Matthew into six major sections depicting Jesus' life and ministry. The part of scripture that we hear from today is what closes out the traditional third section which informs us of the responses to the beginning of Jesus' ministry. This part of Matthew also comes to us right before the Transfiguration of Jesus.

Matthew as a Gospel is written with a decided lean towards interfaith dialogue particularly the interfaith dialogue between Jews and the 'new' Christians. Most scholars have Matthew written around 80 CE [AD] This date has the Gospel writer writing just after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem around 70 CE [AD]. The destruction of the temple or place of worship is not a new phenomenon in Jewish culture. We have various examples of the temples destruction and the questions that it poses. Questions like: Where is God? How can this be the will of God? How do we continue to live faithfully following God without that center?

The issue of identity and lifestyle are at the heart of these questions. The Jews and early Christians whom the Gospel of Matthew was directed towards are struggling to identify who and what they believe in. Recall that the Gospels are written almost a generation after the death of Jesus. Jesus' death is around the year 30 CE, this Gospel is being written approximately 50 years later. The eschatological hope is that Jesus is coming and is coming soon. The entirety of the Gospels, the New Testament writings are all written with the theological understanding that Jesus is coming again and we only have to live a little bit longer in this world for that time to be here.

But who we have here is only the second generation of Christians who are living in the hope for tomorrow. Each subsequent generation is struggling to re-identify who they are in light of Christ whom fewer and fewer have actually had a person to person account with. Few even knew personally one of the twelve Apostles. Early Christians were only just beginning to self-identify as Christian but it was not yet a common term, most would have referred to themselves as following 'the way' out of reference to when Jesus told them that 'he was the way the truth and the life'.

So we come to our scripture today. Knowing that the Gospel writer's possible intent was to help those struggling with their identity and purpose of faith. It puts a slightly different spin on the text. So let us hear it again from the Gospel of Matthew 16:13-20.

This scripture is specifically to help the early Christians establish who they believed Jesus as the Christ to be. A huge part of understanding our faith identities is understanding what we actually believe in. For the early Christians particularly the readers of Matthew it was a matter of differentiation between their Jewish roots and their newfound Christian identities. For us today it is what?

If we were faced today with these same questions what would we say when Jesus looks at us his followers and asks of us “Who do you say that I am?” We have a lot of names for Jesus, his followers response is indicative of how we denote faithful images as descriptive language. Recall that John the Baptist, and Elijah were both people that were held in great esteem as faithful people. We have posters, images and all sorts of things that declare who we believe Jesus to be.

Names hold power and establish identity and presence of belief. The shared understanding of who and what Jesus was and is, is not just relevant to his Disciples or the early Christians. It is relevant today, now.

Our identities as Christians in the world grows even more tenuous. We only have to turn on the news to hear disparaging remarks or calls to action against Christians. The persecution of Christians by other Christians is commonplace. We are constantly being asked who we are and what that means today. Our identities as followers of Christ is being called into question because what we believe and how we believe is being called into question.

So who do we say Jesus is? Do we say he is Lord of Lord, the Great I Am, the Prince of Peace, The Lamb, Alpha, Omega, Beginning, End, Savior, Messiah, Redeemer, Friend, Prince of Peace just to name a few? Who do we say Jesus is by our words it incredibly important but what is more important is who we say Jesus is by our actions. Remember the last line of our scripture today is Jesus asking the Disciples to not tell anyone that he is the Messiah.

This request seems oxymoronic. Why would he ask them to confirm his identity then turn and ask them to also keep it hidden? Well, let us consider the good old saying ‘actions speak louder than words’. The Gospels do not just proclaim Jesus is Lord but they proclaim again and again telling through parable, miracle, story, and teaching who and what Jesus’ purpose was. They share his birth, his life, his ministry, and his death and the interwoven thread is his identity as the Son of God, the Messiah, Jesus.

John F. Kennedy during his campaign for Presidency gave us this famous quote “I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic Party’s candidate for President, who happens also to be a Catholic.”¹ This famous line forever shifted how he identified himself and how he was identified.

So how do we identify ourselves? How do we declare ourselves in light of our faith, our identities? JFK’s famous quote neatly puts religion on the back burner and not the forefront of his life. In the time and era this was not necessarily a bad thing but it was perhaps indicative of a culture shift in how we identified ourselves as faithful people.

Since then where has our faith identities often fallen as we declare who we are? Who do you say you are, is a question we can ask ourselves time and time again. Many of us as our lives change and shift re-ask ourselves this question. Some of us struggle to find our identity and purpose due to circumstances

¹ <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/jj/johnfkenn164048.html#kT8r6O4SHv2qgjsX.99>

sometimes beyond our control. We are continually made aware of who and what we are in the world where our individuality is parallel to our freedom and our cultural identity as American people.

We can rest assured in some parts of our identity but one part of our identity is our faith identity. And this part asks us to seek who we are not just on the individual level but it also asks us to speak together as a body of believers. The image of the body of Christ is not one to be taken lightly. We are all parts of the body whether we step out in faith, use our hands to serve or heal, give of ourselves, love others, or speak the words of our Lord we are all part of the identity of Christian.

SO who do you say you are in light of Christ? Would you respond as JFK did and put faith as a secondary part of your identity? I say this not to accuse anyone or point fingers but rather help us explore further the cultural shift of our faith identity in the world's view. In order to take it and own it and live it we have to understand how it is perceived in order to use it.

Where is faith a part of your life? We often will say it is the center of our worlds and the most precious part of ourselves. But like other fragile and precious items we put our faith identities behind glass doors, or on high shelves out of everyday use or we carefully wrap it up and put it out of harm's way. We forget that our faith identities grow stronger the more we use them and less fragile and more durable in the barrage of what the world can throw at us and what we can do. Almost like a muscle it gets stronger the more you use it, more resilient and flexible, and able to bounce back quicker from injury or harm.

So when it comes to our faith identities I ask you simply not who do you say Jesus is, but who do you say you are in Christ?