



Questions: Who Do You Say That I Am?

June 21, 2015 | Rev. Taylor Fuerst

Matthew 16: ¹³ When Jesus arrived in the villages of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "What are people saying about who the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ They replied, "Some think he is John the Baptizer, some say Elijah, some Jeremiah or one of the other prophets."

¹⁵ He pressed them, "And how about you? Who do you say I am?"

¹⁶ Simon Peter said, "You're the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

¹⁷⁻¹⁸ Jesus came back, "God bless you, Simon, son of Jonah! You didn't get that answer out of books or from teachers. My Father in heaven, God himself, let you in on this secret of who I really am. And now I'm going to tell you who you are, really are. You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out."

¹⁹ "And that's not all. You will have complete and free access to God's kingdom, keys to open any and every door: no more barriers between heaven and earth, earth and heaven. A yes on earth is yes in heaven. A no on earth is no in heaven."

²⁰ He swore the disciples to secrecy. He made them promise they would tell no one that he was the Messiah.

*The Word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God.***

Why are you here today? I assume that you've heard the news, that on Wednesday evening a visitor at prayer meeting shot and killed nine people who had gathered to pray, and to read scripture together. And so I ask you why, just days later, knowing the risks that are inherent to simply being here, why did you come?

Might I suggest an answer? (Yes, I may, since I'm the one with the microphone.) I believe you have come today, because you have an answer to Jesus' question: Who do you say that I am?

Location matters, as it always does, and in this case, Jesus waits until he and the disciples have just entered into the city of Caesarea Phillipi to ask his questions. Governed by Phillip, the son of Herod the Great, the city was called by two names: Caesarea, after Emperor Caesar Augustus, and Phillipi, after Phillip himself, the governor. There was no doubt who was in power here. The city served as the administrative capital of Herod's kingdom; and throughout the city there circulated coins bearing the images of these two giants and the army that fought in their service. Powerful men loomed large in this place; the second those disciples stepped into Caesarea Phillipi, they knew, more than ever, that they were ruled by an empire.

And so it's no surprise that Jesus' first question is met with a kind of weak confusion. "Who do people say that I am?" You can almost hear them looking over their shoulders, wondering who is listening as they begin to answer him, "W-w-well, some say John the Baptist, or m-m-maybe Elijah or Jeremiah..." You can almost hear one of the disciples whisper, "What's he trying to do, get us killed? Get himself killed?" You can't just walk into the seat of the empire and claim that another king has come to town.

But then Jesus turns on the spotlight: "But you--who do YOU say that I am?"

It's a moment of truth. No getting around it here. The empire may be listening, the powers that be might have their ears attuned, but Jesus is standing before them, and he wants to know. "Who do you say that I am?"

Ever since our country was rocked by tragedy again on Wednesday night in Charleston, I have been reading. First the news--confusion about what had happened and why, worry over whether they would find the killer. Then lamentation, sighs of grief, calls for justice and change. Article after article, statement after statement, I bet I have read more than thirty of them. And I can't help but get the sense that we are all searching for words, searching for answers, some are searching for excuses or explanations, and meanwhile, Jesus is standing before us, gently asking this question: But you--who do YOU say that I am?

And if we want to answer as Peter answers, "You are the Messiah, Son of the Living God"--if we are going to speak up and claim Jesus as Lord our lives and Lord of this world, we need to know

that we do so in the shadow of powers that loom even greater than Caesar. As Eric Barreto writes, "[There are] empires today that still rule over us. Perhaps they no longer take the shape of the ancient empire of Rome with its armies and political structure, but [there are] largely invisible forces constantly deceiving us...[there are] empires waging war against our humanity...crushing the oppressed all around us."

Friends, Race is an evil empire. Race is a force that seeks our allegiance, that seeks our submission, our assent to a particular way of life. It seeks to make us structure our lives and our society in a certain way, in a separate, violent way. Race is a way of discipleship--a discipleship that is contrary to following Jesus. It is a way of thinking and believing that skin color makes another person something different; the Empire of race would have us believe that, over and above hair color or eye color or left- or right-handedness, skin color alone makes us fundamentally different--it divides us into different classes, or different categories, it creates a "those people," who are not like me, and therefore are invalid, or worse--dangerous. Friends, it is a way that we have all been taught, no matter what we look like or which category we fall in--we all stand in the violent shadow of this empire.

And it is there--here--standing in this shadow, that Jesus waits for us to answer.

"Who do you say that I am?"

Do you long to claim Peter's answer? Do you long to say, with Peter, You are the Messiah, the Lord, the Son of God? I do. I do. It's why I'm here today, because I want to shout to the world the Jesus is Lord! But naming it--naming the Lordship of Jesus is not something you can just say. These are not words that you and I can simply utter and then walk away. If this is our answer, if we claim with Peter that Jesus is the Messiah, the Lord, then that which rolls off our lips is bound to have implications for our lives. If we submit to the Lordship of Jesus, then what follows is three things:

First, we must confess. We must tell the truth not just about the world, but about ourselves. We must confess that we have too long followed a Lord that is not Jesus. And while we all have multiple confessions to make, today we must confess that we have, consciously or

unconsciously, participated in the empire of racism. The liturgy of confession teaches us to confess both the things we have done, and the things we have left undone. I can speak about this from the perspective of a white woman, raised in the 80s and 90s--I can tell you that I have plenty to confess, and because I know something of the state of humanity, I trust that no matter who you are, you have something to confess, too. As for me, I can say that though I have never knowingly expressed outright racism, and I have never knowingly sought to be cruel or violent to another person based on their race, I still am guilty. I have blind spots. And my blind spots are rooted in the fact that I am both consciously and unconsciously invested in a system that unfairly benefits me over against some of you. It benefits me that I am not considered suspicious when driving late at night or when entering into a retail store. I am given the benefit of the doubt, whereas others are targeted, misrepresented, and seen as a threat. I am perceived as a "blank slate," someone who does not inherently bear any "stain" or "black mark," and who is thereby given the option of whether to even acknowledge or care about the problem of racism. I can just walk away, fooling myself into believing that the real issue is that some people don't know how to deal with their anger.

This is my confession. I haven't done enough. I haven't spoken up. I've walked the easy path, the path that holds the empire in place. Oftentimes, instead of solidarity, I have chosen comfort. I am so sorry.

The Lordship of Jesus demands that my first move is to kneel in contrition and confession.

Then, the Lordship of Jesus requires that we actively turn away from the other powers in this world that seek to make us their disciples. It requires that we--all of us--actively work to interrupt racism. After we confess that we, too, have a share in this empire, if we are to claim the Lordship of Jesus with more than just our lips, then we must find a new path to walk, and new people to walk it with. We must listen to the reality of one another's pain and sorrow, not just over lives lost on Wednesday, but over the little bits of life that are lost each time another headline hits, and each time a life didn't even matter enough to make the headlines, each time a false accusation, an assumption, a suspicious glance is delivered. We must learn to see with

different eyes, and as we see clearly, to name it. To join our voices to those crying for justice, and join our hands in that work.

Finally, calling Jesus "Messiah" and "Lord" today requires one more thing. And this is the one you won't see the news anchors or the politicians or the pundits saying. The Lordship of Jesus requires me to release my ability AND my inability to do anything about our sin. It requires us to let go of the control that makes us think that we can overcome this empire ourselves, AND to let go of the despair and fear that nothing will ever change. It requires me, instead, to turn it over to Jesus, who is Lord of it all. Jesus, who is Lord of blacks and Lord of whites. Who is Lord of Dylann Roof and Lord of the gun he wielded on Wednesday. Who is Lord of Kalief Browder and Lord of Rikers Island. Who is Lord of Ferguson and Lord of Baltimore, Lord of New York and Lord of McKinney, and Lord of every mouth that has spat racist hatred, and Lord of every mouth that has cried for Justice. He is Lord of Mother Emmanuel AME Church. Which is exactly why 10 people had gathered on Wednesday night--to pray to the one who is Lord, who alone possesses the power to make something of this broken place and our broken, broken lives.

This is why you showed up today. Because you believe that Jesus really is the Messiah, the Son of God, Lord over all of this unholy mess. You believe he has the power to redeem it, to transform this pain. And you are dying to know what he is asking of you. Friends, I cannot answer that question for each of you individually, and I cannot even fully answer that question for us as a body, as Westbury Church. But I can say this: God has uniquely gifted this community of faith with a desire for racial reconciliation. We come here because of diversity, because here we see and have renewed hope that Jesus really is taking down the dividing walls among us. I have two things to say about that, friends. First, God has already uniquely gifted this church with possibilities for reconciliation and healing that do not exist elsewhere. God has already brought us part of the way, Church! That is the first thing. And the second is this: we have to go further. Driven by the Spirit of God, we must push further, further out of our comfort zones, further out of our usual routines, further beyond our self-congratulations to see what God yet longs to make of us. And for that, I am calling this church to prayer. I am calling this church to

listen...listen to one another, to the stories we share and the stories we do not share. And to listen, most of all, to our Lord Jesus, who calls us to be disciples only to him, to follow only him.

And so this Wednesday, I ask you to gather with me for prayer in this place. I ask you to gather together with ears and hearts open, asking God what God would have us do, who God wants us to be. We will gather in this room on Wednesday at 6:30, and my prayer is that you will come and bring your full self before the Lord as we submit ourselves together for God's work of reconciliation.

But we won't wait until then to begin. We begin now. We begin today, with grace. Grace that we all need, grace that meets us at the foot of the cross, grace that meets us here at the table, where our Lord shared HIS body, that we might become that body, made one, united by his blood. We begin at the place where the curtain is torn, where the walls are brought down, where divisions are erased, and where resurrection power is made available to all. Here, at the foot of the cross, here at the table, where every empire falls. Here, there is only one Lord, and his name is Jesus.

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