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Trinity Episcopal Church

Exodus 1:8 – 2:10

Psalm 124

Romans 12: 1 – 8

Matthew 16: 13 – 20

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?...But who do *you* say that I am?”

Open ended questions if ever there were. A Gallup poll perhaps, but Jesus is neither a politician nor an advertising executive. Two questions that cut to the chase in our faith. Two questions, directing our gaze first outward then inward.

Jesus is at a turning point in his ministry. He is in Caesarea Philippi, at the northernmost edge of the Galilee. It's as far as one can go from Jerusalem and still be in Israel. From this point on, Jesus will turn and have his face set towards Jerusalem and all that awaits him there. It's time to stick a finger up in the air and see which way the wind is blowing. What do people believe? What have they heard and what are they thinking? Do the people of Israel (and beyond) understand Jesus' ministry and message? And do those who know him best, those who have walked and talked, eaten and slept, alongside Jesus, do *they* understand? So Jesus asks these two haunting questions.

Author and theologian, Joan Chittester, in her book, *In Search of Belief*, writes, “The first [question] opens up the kind of faith-sharing that brings me into the insights of the rest of humanity about the place of Jesus in the human condition and the divine economy.” It is, Chittester continues, the same issue with which every age in the last two millennia has had to wrestle in order to try to understand the person and work of Jesus Christ. How do we differentiate between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith? How do we understand in our hearts as well as in our heads this fully human, yet fully divine, being? How can we live with the tension of those seemingly disparate, exclusionary identities all wrapped up into one being?

The first question – “who do the people say that I am?” – has been the substance of theological debate for centuries. From at least the first church councils at Nicea and Constantinople in the fourth century, to the more contemporary “Jesus Seminars,” people have debated Jesus' existence, authenticity, humanity, divinity, relationship to God the Creator and to the Holy Spirit, and even Jesus' self-understanding. From the institutional church's perspective, this question has been the uncrossable boundary between heterodoxy (meaning other glory/belief, i.e. heresy) and orthodoxy (right glory/belief).

The Nicene Creed, which we will say once again in a few minutes, dates from 325 CE. It was one of the first codified attempts to encapsulate the answer to ‘who do the people say that I am.’ Words and phrases, expressing complex, abstract concepts, were chosen exceedingly carefully for the Creed. Lengthy arguments ensued over almost every word before each became part of the whole, and yet, the Creed remains a statement of faith that has survived virtually unchanged for nearly 1700 years.

Even with the Creed, trying to identify who Jesus is for us is like trying to wrap our arms around the wind. We can describe what we think we know and believe about Jesus, but we cannot even begin to circumscribe who Jesus truly is. In the Creed, notice that the second paragraph of the Creed, corresponding to the second person of the Trinity, Jesus, is also the longest. We seem to know the most about Jesus – or at least we think we do – and yet we are still at a loss for adequate words. There has never been and probably never will be any clear-cut, mutually agreeable response for all of us as to who

Jesus is. And that's okay. Even though there is no consensus, and even though we will never have the fullness of a complete answer, we still need to wrestle with it, ponder it and keep stirring it around.

Jesus' second question, "but who do YOU (plural) say that I am?" gets more to the heart of the matter. Both questions are addressed to the disciples. The disciples have responded to Jesus' first question by looking outward at the crowd around them. This second question is meant to make the disciples look inward. This second question, Chittester declares, is the one meant personally for her as well. It is the question that no one can answer for her. "It is the Jesus of my own life," she writes, "and the life of the world around me that I have come to confess in the Creed." The Jesus of her own life, the Jesus that she confesses in the creed, is the Jesus that Chittester follows. "And it is *that* Jesus who captivates me completely," she concludes.

But who do *you* say that Jesus is? Who do *I* say that Jesus is? This is the question that – just as with the disciples – directs us inwards. Ultimately, it is the defining question of our individual spiritual journeys. Our individual answers today to this question of who Jesus is may be different than what we would have said yesterday, or what we might say tomorrow.

A friend of mine used to talk about her 'felt-board Jesus.' That was her way of talking about how her understanding of Jesus had grown and changed over time and through experience. As a child, she was taught a very simple, two-dimensional image of Jesus. Just like a paper doll cut out put up on a felt board to tell a story. Jesus as a character in stories, but not much else. The felt-board Jesus was comforting and secure because it didn't challenge my friend to be in dialogue with Scripture or to question her faith. Ultimately, this felt-board Jesus was a Jesus that my friend outgrew because it couldn't stand up to the complexities, tensions, both/ands and mysteries of my friend's life or faith. Who Jesus became for my friend was very different from how she had seen him before, and different yet from whom Jesus is for her these many years later. My friend's willingness to embrace the challenge to her security and to see it through resulted in a deepening of her faith foundation, a foundation on which she has continued to build. And that is, hopefully, each of our journeys in a nutshell.

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!" responds Peter to this second question. "Blessed are you, Simon" says Jesus, "for you didn't come to this on your own but through God's revelation to you!" Peter's identification of Jesus as the messiah is not the result of his own intelligence or of some personal insight or of insider knowledge. It is a gift from God. Divine revelation can take on a variety of guises, but is perhaps most often found in the day-to-day, ordinary experiences of our lives. Divine revelation, active and abundant all around us, allows us to know with heart knowledge that far exceeds head knowledge, just who Jesus is for us. That willingness to be open to God working in our lives, revealing God's self to us in a multitude of ways, is what faith is. And collectively, that is what becomes the foundation for the Church. The ability to proclaim Jesus as the Christ is indeed a gift to us, and in turn, our gift to the world.

"And I tell you that you are the Rock [petra], and on this rock, I will build my church and death will not overcome it." Peter, despite his foibles and frailties, will somehow find that rock, that foundation within himself. Each of us, despite our foibles and frailties, finding that rock within and reaching out to help others do the same is what the Church is about.

This passage is one of only two places in all of the Gospels where the word "church" is used. In Greek, it is *ekklesia*. It's literal meaning is "to be called out," meaning an assembly. The disciples and all

the saints – past, present and those yet to be – form an endless line of people who are called out by God. We are called out to receive that divine revelation of God at work in the world, and are called to be servants of that work. And nothing, not even death, can separate us from that calling. Nothing can destroy what we are about in this world.

Who do the people say that I am, Jesus asks the disciples. Perhaps we, the Church, should ask, who do the people say that Jesus is, based on how we represent the Body of Christ? Can people tell by looking at us who Jesus is for us? And if so, then what does that look like? How are we bearing that divine revelation to the world around us – to our neighbors, classmates and co-workers? How do we as a congregation re-present Jesus in this community? Do we confess who Jesus is for us by our day-to-day interactions with others in the grocery line, and driving down the highway, as well as by what we say when we are here?

But who do YOU say that I am? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, shortly before he was executed by the Nazis in Germany, wrote, “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?” That is the question that should hold a central place in our lives. That is where the rubber meets the road for those of us who profess to be Christians. It is indeed the question no one else can answer for us. And it is indeed the question for which no single answer is adequate. It is the turning point for Jesus in his earthly life when he asks these questions of the people and of his disciples. It is the turning point in our earthly lives and our lives together, called out as the Church, when we begin to answer them. +