

“But who do you say that I am?”

There’s an old joke about three recently deceased clergy standing at the gates of heaven. One is a Baptist pastor, one’s a Roman Catholic priest and the third is an Episcopalian priest. While they are talking to St. Peter, along comes none other than Jesus Christ himself.

Pointing to the Baptist, Jesus asks: “Who do you say that I am?” “Hmm,” the pastor begins, “the Bible says...” “No,” says Jesus gently. “Please step back.” Then, pointing to the Roman Catholic, Jesus asks again: “Who do you say that I am?” The priest pauses for a moment and then says, “His Holiness Pope Francis says...” “No,” says Jesus. “Please step back.”

Now the Episcopal priest is nervous. “Who do *you* say that I am?” “Oh, well, um,” the priest says, “you are the Messiah? the Son of the living God?” Jesus smiles and nods, and turns to walk away. “Well, but on the other hand,” says the priest...

Now, when I imagine the Risen Christ asking me that question, my aim is to come up with some version of: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” But God and I both know that some of my life actions say, “Well, but on the other hand...”

Looking at what our actions and our choices say about who Jesus is for us is important. On the cusp of another stewardship season, we do well to examine how we use our resources, our time and our talents. And I know the sting of recognizing my own inability to lead a life that says more fully what Christ means to me.

Fortunately, I’m also aware that God is not interested in my guilt if all I’m going to do is wallow in it. And I know that God also appreciates stumbling blocks that cause me to lose my balance *just enough* to wake me up a little. There’s a little nugget of a stumbling block in this joke about three people who think access to heaven depends on our score on a pop quiz.

Because, you see, Matthew’s Jesus isn’t asking his followers to come up with the one *correct* answer. He genuinely wants to know what they are saying, what they are adding to the conversation. He wants his followers to try to describe their experience of him.

His first question sets the context: “Who are people saying the Son of the Human to be?” Jesus is a first century Mediterranean Jew and so, like everybody else in this story, he needs to hear the opinions of other people so that he can learn who he is.

Jesus is not *testing* to see if they know who he is, he is *asking* so that he can discover his identity. He comes from a culture that defines people by their home village, their profession or their family name.

Many white, North Americans are so intensely individualistic that it’s hard for us to imagine a culture that relies on the opinions of other people for

self-definition. And Jesus, through his actions, has made it unusually difficult to describe him in the ways that people are culturally used to doing that.

They can't call him Jesus the Stoneworker, because he isn't doing the work that Joseph did. Some call him Jesus of Nazareth, which they think should tell them everything about him, but he doesn't act like a Nazarene peasant. His followers tell him that people say he is John or Elijah or Jeremiah or another prophet.

So, *those* people didn't see a smiling, somewhat Nordic Jesus holding babies or fluffy lambs. What those people around Jesus saw was a wild-eyed prophet like John the Baptizer who wept like Jeremiah while speaking the truth against injustice and wickedness clearly and fearlessly, like Elijah.

Jesus calls himself the "Son of the Human." His awareness of his Divine identity as the Son of God is still dawning. The Son of the Human is on the verge of unlocking new identities for all of God's children. And so he needs to hear God's truth from the lips of his friend and follower, Simon bar-Jonah.

"But who do you say that I am?"

Simon bar-Jonah answers: "What I have been saying you to be is the Christ." When Jesus recognizes God's voice and hears God's truth, he responds: "And what I say *you* to be, my friend, is blessed."

And then, as was the custom to commemorate a pivotal event, Jesus gave his friend Simon a new name that means "a rock" in Greek. "You are Peter, and upon this *petra* [this 'rock'] I will construct my church."

Now, as we will see next week, Peter has spoken words that he does not fully understand. God spoke through Peter's interior awareness to acknowledge the Divine nature of Jesus Christ. That consciousness, that partial awareness, is the rock – the foundation upon which the church can stand with all her flaws and all her beauty.

Through that heavenly consciousness, God aligns heaven and earth, and pierces the gossamer veil between them. God spoke into interior Peter's awareness and Peter spoke out God's words on earth, forming the foundation that Jesus immediately recognized and named.

People still gather on the foundational rock formed by the human identification of Christ. Together, we receive the new humanity that Jesus Christ, the Son of the Human and the Son of God, offers to all people everywhere.

The rock established by the interaction of heaven and earth is God's ultimate and eternal truth. And so nothing unleashed from the gates of hell can prevail against the children of God gathered on this rock. Even when the gates of hell release evil, death and hatred, they cannot overcome the children of God because, like Peter and the first disciples, we have the keys to another gate – the gate to the realm of heaven.

Now, despite popular storytelling and jokes, Peter is not the eternal afterlife security guard scouring an enormous book of names, vices and virtues. Peter and all of God's children have the keys of a very different gate – the gate of human consciousness that opens to the influences and insights of God. These are given for us to embody on earth through our words and actions. This is what Paul meant in his letter to the Romans: "...be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God."

When we accept the renewal of our awareness, whatever we attach ourselves to on earth is what we bind to ourselves with the spiritual force of heaven. And whatever we liberate ourselves from here on earth is what we free ourselves from with all the spiritual force of heaven breaking through us.

Heaven comes through the opened gate, freeing us to engage in what is life-affirming, even where evil and injustice are present. Freeing us to disengage from that which is death-dealing, even where self-centeredness and hatred are present.

And so, we gather together on the rock of heavenly consciousness. This church, St. Elizabeth, is one of the gateways where we can open ourselves to God's heaven – hearts, minds and souls. We aren't looking for the one right answer. We aren't trying to complete some project like "making it to heaven" or "achieving world peace."

We open ourselves to allow the Holy Spirit to have her influence on us, to teach us and guide us so that we can give, as Paul wrote, "gifts that differ according to the grace given to us."

We will not fully understand and anything we say will be incomplete. Even so, we must say something. Because the church as the body of Christ still needs our voice to continue giving it shape and identity. The Risen Christ still genuinely wants to know what we are saying to people and needs to hear us say it.

So, what are the words that God speaks deep in your heart of hearts? Some say that Jesus is God's way of showing us how much God loves all people. Others say that Jesus is how God showed up to live like one of us so that we might start to understand how to be in relationship.

Some say that Jesus is God's heart laid bare, revealing a God who grieves at loss and division, whose heart burns at injustice, a God who is crushed when we reject God's love, and yet who loves us totally, no matter what.

Some say that Jesus shows us what's possible in situations that seem unworkable; wholeness in the face of disease and dying; compassion in the face of suffering; generosity in the face of starvation and poverty.

With the keys to the realm of heaven in our hands, the Risen Christ stands before us even now, asking: "But who do *you* say that I am?"

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