

“Who Do YOU Say That I Am?”
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Congregational Church of Hollis
Sermon Proper 19B
Mark 8:27-38
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Prayer: *May the words of my mouth, and the meditations in our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, in Jesus’ name. Amen.*

Yesterday afternoon, I went to the Hollis Historical Society’s ‘Historic House Tour’ event at the Emerson-Gould-Worcester House. After a fantastic tour of a beautiful historic Hollis home, someone from this congregation introduced me to a long-time resident of Hollis and told me this story: “When I first moved here,” the church member said, “this woman told me about her own early days here. She had gone to a club meeting somewhere, and everyone was introducing themselves. My new friend here introduced herself and said, ‘I’m from Hollis.’ It was a pleasant gathering, and afterward she was offered a ride home by another, older woman from Hollis. As they drove home, the elder woman said in a kind but unequivocal voice, ‘My dear, may I just clarify that, although it may be the case that you now *live* in Hollis, you are not *from* Hollis?’”

Identity—who and what we are, how we understand ourselves, and how others see us—this is a uniquely human preoccupation. But it’s one that seems to matter greatly to most of us, and for good reason. Our identity is intimately linked with our sense of purpose and meaning in the world.

With respect to a number of recent news stories, it’s been impossible not to notice how various faith-based groups have taken quite different positions on recent political hot-button issues. And what’s confusing to many people is that individuals from diametrically opposing stances, opinions, or convictions identify themselves as being close allies of Jesus. *Their* identity, each one says, is wrapped up with *his*.

In that case, it’s worth asking the same question Jesus put to Peter and his disciples some two thousand years ago.

“Who do people say that I am?” he asks, as they walk toward Caesarea Philippi. He’s not just fishing for the gossip about him, nor is he digging for compliments. He wants those who are drawn to him to think, to reflect, on who or what he is. What is his *identity* in the world—how do people characterize and name him? –And why? Because if they align themselves with him, his identity also says something about who they understand *themselves* to be.

“Some say John the Baptist,” one of the disciples reports. “Elijah,” says another. “One of the prophets.” Hmm. What do we know about those figures? Well, John the Baptist—that contemporary cousin of Jesus who was unafraid to speak truth to power—he wound up being beheaded by King Herod. Elijah was also *persona non grata* to the political leaders

of his day. As were most—or, dare I say *all*?—of the biblical prophets, come to think of it. Interesting.

“So, who do *you* say that I am?” Jesus asks.

The question is challenging. And it was meant to be. Jesus was always making his disciples think about things in order to make deeper sense of life. And the ones who stuck with him did it because they recognized that their lives were more meaningful, more fulfilling, because of the tough questions he put to them. But this particular question was made more significant because of *where* he asked it.

Jesus could have posed the question anywhere—at the lakeside in Galilee, where most of them felt completely safe, secure, and at ease; or, in the living room of one of their homes; even, perhaps, in the bustling center of Jerusalem—in the Temple, if he’d wanted. Any of those venues would have represented fine places to ask a question about how the world saw, or identified, Jesus.

But at the very beginning of the passage, Mark mentions that Jesus and his disciples were on their way to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Why there? Caesarea Philippi, as Jesus and his first followers knew full well, was the Roman political power hub of their region. It was the center where worship of the Emperor, or Caesar, happened. The Jewish people were allowed to practice their own religion so long as they paid their taxes (plus a little bit extra for the privilege of being Jewish), and so long as they didn’t disrupt the peace and stability of the Empire. Emperor Augustus’ self-proclaimed title was ‘*divi filius*’—Son of God. And those citizens (Roman, Jewish, or otherwise) who refused to recognize him as such could plan to suffer.

So. Jesus *might* have asked the question somewhere safer, where there weren’t ears that might hear and accuse them of rebellion, insurrection, *heresy*, for proclaiming anyone other than Caesar as lord, or god, son of god, or supreme authority: “Who do *you* say that I am?”

But as Karoline Lewis, a homiletics professor at Luther Seminary, points out: Jesus puts the question to them in “[a] location that is exactly the opposite of settling, safe, and secure on all levels” for a reason. “There’s ... a theological necessity to this location,” she argues. “The God that Jesus reveals is unsettling, disrupting, and there’s no better way to get this point across than to ask ... this question here and now.”¹

And who should answer, but Peter? Peter, that leader among Jesus’ followers, the one who’s both full of courage and conviction, but also so often apparently full of himself. And so often finding his foot firmly planted in his mouth. To his absolute credit, Peter answers with an inspired boldness: “You are the Messiah.” To which Jesus responds, “Don’t tell anyone.”

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3681>

Our lesson this morning immediately precedes the story of the Transfiguration—that moment where Jesus and a few of his disciples are on the top of a mountain and Jesus' identity is revealed in a powerful, mystical experience; those who are with him hear the voice of God say, "This is my Son, the Beloved. Listen to him." And then, as they're walking down the mountain back to their workplaces, Jesus again tells them not to say anything to others about it.

It's worth wondering why Jesus doesn't want his followers to go blabbing his identity to one and all. Reading the gospel accounts, we see that Jesus is ultimately more concerned that people show their belief in him more by their actions and attitudes than by their words. Words are easy. Living with integrity according to the words you proclaim or affirm, that's hard work.

Next, Mark tells us, Jesus began to teach Peter and the others that he would have to undergo great suffering, and be rejected by everyone—including the religious leaders who had taught those men from the time they could understand, all about watching and waiting for the Messiah, for God's Promised One. He talked about how he would be humiliated, and eventually he would be killed—and after three days, rise again. Jesus said all this, Mark reports, "quite openly." He wasn't afraid, or embarrassed, or ashamed of who he was, or what he knew he was being called to do. His identity as God's servant, as one who was willing to suffer for the sake of the kingdom, was clear to him and he did not run from it or try to downplay it.

Clearly, this was deeply upsetting to Peter, who took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. We're not told what he said, but we can imagine it might have been something like, "Whoah. Take it easy, Jesus. You'll scare everyone away with talk like that. Look, you've got this amazing reputation for healing people and showing the good, the bad, and the ugly how to live a better life. Why do you want to go and frighten them with talk like that? Don't you see how it will squander your influence?"

In Jesus' and Peter's day, and in the Biblical world, names and their meanings were significant and were understood, in some way, to describe the essence of the person. What, I wonder, did Peter think he meant when he had declared that Jesus was the Messiah? The Greek word for Messiah, of course, is *Christos*, or Christ. What did Peter mean by saying that Jesus was the Christ?

What do we mean when we say that Jesus is the Christ? Especially in settings that are politically charged, where all the powers and expectations of this world are on full display, inviting us to come and bow to them—or at least to play along with them in order to avoid the sorts of consequences that come from not conforming—what does it mean to say Jesus is the Messiah?

In recognizing that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, Peter made the connection to the prophet Isaiah, who had foretold that God's promised one would be identified by many names: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Isaiah also

prophesied that the Messiah would be called Emmanuel: literally, God-with-us. Just think about what that means for the world!

By proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah in the shadow of earthly power and dominion, Peter showed rare insight and courage. But when he later rebuked Jesus, suggesting Jesus could do divine work without incurring the full cost in human or political terms, Jesus called Peter “Satan”—or adversary, antagonist, one who works against another.

As those who call ourselves Christians—little Christ’s, imitators of Christ, those who say our goal is to be ever more like Christ Jesus—how would others identify us? Who, or what, would others say that *we* are?

Because of course, as with Peter, we ought to know that the words we *say* about Jesus are probably less telling than what our actions and attitudes indicate. Who, or what, do our lives proclaim that Jesus is to us?

Each and every day, you and I are invited in subtle and blatant ways to align ourselves with various causes, groups, and individuals as a way to define our own identity. Where will our primary devotion, our identity-shaping allegiance, be focused? What will our life say about who we think Jesus is?

Listen. Here is the exciting, transforming truth: Even if our lives haven’t always, or don’t yet, say what we want them to about who Jesus is (or about who we want to be, as Christians), it’s okay for now, for the time being. God invites us to keep trying.

In Christ Jesus, God has demonstrated that love will prevail over every form of brokenness, including (but not limited to) hypocrisy, greed, deception, fear, humiliation, even death itself. God’s love and power to forgive and heal overcomes it all.

May our words *and* our lives tell this story, as we proclaim Jesus as Christ, Messiah, transforming Hope, Savior—of our own lives, and of all the world. Amen.