

Proper 16A – August 24, 2014
Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20
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If we were to identify a center point, or pivot point, in Matthew's gospel, it would be this passage today from the 16th chapter – just as the disciples and Jesus turn from their familiar surroundings in Galilee and head to the mountain of Transfiguration and on to Jerusalem. Before this point, Jesus was reaching out for followers, and his ministry was pretty much confined to the familiar northern backwater territory of Galilee. His identity was defined by names such as Son of Man which is what he called himself, or Teacher, which is what his followers called him up until this moment. But at this point things change. Jesus has now shifted his focus to a wider, more dangerous territory that would soon lead them to a showdown with religious and imperial authorities in Jerusalem, the capital. In order to get his followers to think beyond their comfort zone of Galilee, and to go with Jesus on this most dangerous journey, he needed to prepare them so that they might remain resolute through the fearsome experiences to come. In this pivotal passage, Jesus begins the preparation by asking his disciples two questions. First, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Some, while they were astonished by the authority of his words and the wonder of his deeds, would still declare "Is not this [just] the son of the carpenter [from Nazareth]?" Others saw him merely as a rebel, a revolutionary, a troublemaker, or even as one possessed by a devil. Still others saw him as taking up where John the Baptist left off, proclaiming a Kingdom of God at hand. Or maybe he's Elijah who, since a whirlwind had carried him up to heaven, had never died—so maybe Jesus is Elijah come back to earth! Or perhaps Jesus, who was clearly doing prophetic things, could be one of the other prophets brought back to life.

But Jesus' second question raises the stakes and forces a response from the hearts and minds of his own disciples—"But who do *you* say that I am?" For Simon the impetuous, the matter *seems* clear—Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God! That's a revelation of something that emerges out of a foundational bedrock, as it were, and is revealed to some of the loose smaller rocks on the surface. For when Simon gets it right, Jesus responds with a pun, of all things: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are *Petros* [a rock] and on this *petra* [this bedrock revelation] I will build my church..." (Matthew 16:17-18).ⁱ And he further tells Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."ⁱⁱ

But having come to this new pivotal awareness—then what? What kind of Messiah, what kind of Deliverer has Peter in mind? For in the verses that follow, when Jesus then tells his disciples that the consequences of his liberating salvation will involve death, his own death, Peter gets very upset. Peter, and many others who had hoped for a Divine Deliverer, anticipated a Messiah who would be the great liberator and warrior king, who would achieve victory and vindication for the conquered people of Israel, thus bypassing any Roman cross. But Jesus makes it clear that he is not fitting into other peoples' presuppositions. At the moment Peter and the rest had received the revelation of God's

Messiah in Jesus, that was more than their frail hands and limited imaginations could hold. Such a revelation was like saying God is on the other side of the door and Jesus is the keyhole. Here Peter, you take the keys of that Kingdom; but before you can unlock the door you will be blinded by the light coming through the keyhole; or maybe you'll forget which is the right key; or maybe you'll just forget where you put your keys like so many of the rest of us!

So, who do people say Jesus is today? Well, for many, Jesus was a great teacher and moral guide of how we ought to live and act, and even die. Yet as Frederick Buechner points out,ⁱⁱⁱ as a teacher, Jesus is at least matched by Chuang Tzu, or Socrates, or Gandhi, for instance. And as a moral example, we can only look at Jesus and despair, knowing that we cannot live up to that heroic or saintly standard. For others today, Jesus is either locked in certain pages of the Bible, or only contained in, or mediated through, certain hierarchical church structures and rituals; or he is merely a memorable spirit of an otherwise long dead and buried Jesus that somehow lives on as an inspiration to us all, like the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr. Yet if the Romans succeeded for all practical purposes in killing Jesus permanently nearly 2000 years ago, then like Socrates, Gandhi and King, Jesus was simply another saintly victim of the fear and ignorance and violence of humanity; and the cross is no more than a symbol of ultimate defeat.

Contrary to these ideas, the Gospels make the outrageous and astounding proclamation that Jesus who died lives on among us. He is the Risen One—the very love and power of the living God, working continuously within and far beyond the church to repair the world and to make each of us loving and whole and just, beyond anything we could conceivably pull off by ourselves. Of course, most of us have divided minds about who Jesus is. In order to apprehend something of the mystery of Jesus, we must take into our heart of hearts this second and more personal question he posed to his disciples: “But who do *you* say that I am?” This gospel text is found in different formats in Matthew, Mark and Luke, with the only sentence that remains constant in all three being this question, “But who do *you* say that I am?” As we attempt any answer to this, it calls us also to question who *we* are, or even more so, *whose* we are. And we answer that as much or more so by what we do than what we say. I was inspired to make this connect of understanding Jesus’ identity by looking at our own identity in relation to him and others, after reading a while back in the *New York Times* about the efforts of a number of U.S. Senators from both political parties who had pursued legislation that would expressly prohibit cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment of detainees in U.S. custody, and would also restrict military interrogation techniques to those authorized in the new Army field manual. This bi-partisan group of senators were met with opposition by a number of others who said there was no need for this legislation because, as one senator put it, “the detainees are not prisoners of war; they are terrorists.” One senator replied by arguing that the debate “is not about who *they* are. It’s about who *we* are.” “Americans,” said the senator, “hold ourselves to a higher standard.”^{iv} It’s not about who *they* are. It’s about who *we* are.

“But who do *you* say that I am?” This question that also calls us to question who or *whose* we are, is not a question we can answer well with words. We certainly cannot fully answer

this with our beliefs or doctrines, nor with our liturgy or more secular rituals. All that may point us in the right, or wrong, direction. For we know how our words and rituals in our national and religious life have so often seemed more to divide than unite us. Our Christian words have often been pressed into service, used and abused for distinctly unchristian motives. They have too frequently been used to separate, condemn and even torture and kill.

Perhaps the only way we can answer Jesus' second question is by how we live out a life of faith over the long haul – the sum total of where we've been, who we are, and who we are trying to become. Our whole lives with their events and choices, learnings and losses, failures and recoveries are "alphabets of grace", as Frederick Buechner put it, spelling out the answer to the question, "But who do you say that I am?" I know my life's holiest moments are when I can hear or see that what is being spelled out is that very grace by which I live; and when I can see how it is being spelled out in others' lives.

"But who do *you* say that I am?" We answer this first by seeing how our *lives* proclaim Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ; by looking at a mirror, as it were, at our life together, in order to get an idea as a community of faith and as fellow citizens, of who we are saying Jesus is, by what we are doing in his name.

So who is Jesus? Well, that is the living question. And no amount of acquired or hearsay knowledge about Jesus will ever replace a personal knowledge of him which comes from sharing in his life, in and through our life together. To share the life and work, pains and joys of someone we love, that is the very logic of friendship like the friendship between Jesus and Peter. It is to this vocation of friendship with the living Jesus that we are invited to answer the question he poses: "But who do *you* say that I am?" – and answer him not only with our lips, but in our lives.

ⁱ This is reminiscent of our first reading from Isaiah (51:1), "Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug."

ⁱⁱ Matthew 16:19. As one observer put it,

"Knowing he will soon die, Jesus hands over [figuratively] to his disciple Peter the 'keys to the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 16:19)...[Later interpreters of this passage] understood this metaphorical key and its capacity 'to bind and loose' to mean Peter's authority to interpret the laws that regulate the community of the faithful [, the Church]. Some have seen it as a proof text for the primacy of the Roman Church, which Peter is said to have founded before his martyrdom in Rome. [In addition, later] imagination...made of Peter the gatekeeper of heaven, his golden key signifying the saint's power to absolve sin and open the door to eternal life, and the silver, to lock out from heaven the souls unworthy of heaven's gate...Keys evoke the tension between seeking and finding, restricting and releasing, withholding and giving, prohibiting and admitting. The individual with the 'key' momentarily becomes threshold guardian and opener of the way. Human consciousness perpetually searches for the key that will give it access to the object of its longing—self-discovery, peace of mind, the enigmatic heart of the beloved, [eternal life]. The difference between being shut out and getting in seems as tantalizingly simple as...a key sliding into a keyhole. [A] key is mercurial, however. Knowing what is 'key' often requires the trying of many different keys before the hoped-for yielding of the bolt" (Quoted in "Key" in *The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism*, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin, eds., [The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images](#) (Cologne, Germany: TASCHEN, 2010), p. 562).

ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), p. 32.

^{iv} Bob Herbert, "Who We Are." *New York Times* (August 1, 2005).