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August 20, 2006
11th After Pentecost
Exodus 13 – 15
Mark 8: 27 – 30

Life Changing Questions: “Who Do You Say That I Am?”

Who do you say Jesus is? If someone asked you. What do you say? Do you say he was a great teacher, a prophet, the son of God, the Christ? Do you say he is Lord?

What would you say? (Let folks answer).

Did you know $\frac{3}{4}$ of the world's population knows little to nothing about Jesus Christ? Most of these people live in poverty and in third world nations. Six out of 10 adults believe church is a waste of time. But they still have spiritual interests.

Our life changing question for today is “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asks us as his disciples.

If we don't know who will know? Look at the first disciples, Jesus basically asks what they hear people saying. The word on the street is he is a prophet or teacher of some kind—possibly John the Baptist returned from the dead, or Elijah returned.

Then he asks them—but who do you say that I am? And Peter speaking for the Disciples says, “You are the Messiah.”

But what does that mean? Do you know what it means when you call him Jesus Christ? Does what you actually understand and believe add up to that affirmation of faith?

Many believers will identify Jesus as a great teacher. The role of teacher is what first comes to mind. They may not use that label but they will say who Jesus is by talking about what he taught.

His use of parables, for example was extraordinary. Many rabbis in Jesus day used parables but Jesus had his own unique way of taking a long accustomed story formula and changing it to give the listener a wake up call—a new insight—a new perspective on God. Especially in his parables about the Kingdom.

Just the other day I was in a conversation about the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard. Do you remember that parable story? How the owner of the vineyard hires laborers at 8 a.m., then mid-morning, then at noon, then mid-after noon, and then at five minutes before stopping time and when it comes to paying them their wages—they all get paid the same—the first and the last!

Boy does that rankle us! Jesus wasn't a person to moralize. His subject matter here wasn't about a day's wage for a day's labor--- his subject matter was always about God—God's way, God's character, God's Kingdom.

This particular parable is about God's loving grace—It doesn't matter when you chose to come into the Kingdom of God and live your life on behalf of the kingdom, God's grace is the same for everyone! It's a gift. God chooses to give it—not based on what you earn or deserve—based on God's love for all.

Makes you think doesn't it?

Life involves work—would you rather work in the joy and freedom of God's love and grace? Or would you rather work in the joylessness of human toil for no true gain? No ultimate purpose? No real future? No real and lasting change.

His teaching/preaching made Jesus pretty unpopular with the powers that be. The hard side of Jesus' teachings were considered prophetic.

A prophet is someone who speaks for God—who is able to discern where we've gotten off the road of God's itinerary and gone our own way. In Israel that involved calling the governing authorities to account as well.

Jesus was very outspoken about political things and social issues. He talked about money more than any other subject and he ate with people considered by the faithful to be swindlers and crooks such as tax collectors.

He called King Herod, the ruler of his country an “Old Fox,” and had no hesitation about announcing God's word to the powers that be.

He angered the religious leaders of his time by running the money changers out of the temple—shouting at them that they had turned

the temple into a den of thieves –they regularly short changed the rural poor who had to exchange their Roman money into Temple money in order to pay the temple tax or purchase the required animals for sacrifices.

Later he declared the temple—akin to our Capitol in national significance-- would fall at the hands of the Romans—boy that made folks happy.

Jesus didn't exactly run a popularity contest, did he? But then he wasn't running for political office either. Although he was very political. So political that he was eventually sentenced to a traitor's death.

To this day, other faiths understand Jesus as a great teacher, or prophet. The Jews honor him as the prophet of love.

The Muslims the same.

Is Jesus anything more than a good teacher? Anything more than a prophet?

Anything more than a great man?

Think of the great people the world has seen come and go in a myriad of areas that have left the world a better place in the fields of science, history, politics, technology, the fine arts, psychology, military genius, religion and yet even as their good legacy continues—even as they have contributed to our understanding of truth and knowledge, what they sacrificed to give us has proved inadequate to the human dilemma.

And there is the rub and the significant difference. Here is where Jesus' question is starkly presented to us—Not, “Who does the world say I am”—but “WHO do YOU say I am?”

Christians know there is nothing the admirable of this world have to give us or will ever have to give us that has the power to save. The power to transform. To forgive. To renew. To restore. To raise to life. To give a new start. That can overcome evil or the reality of death.

They don't have that power.

WHO does have that power?

Only one person I know of: GOD.
God alone has that power.

But some will say, Jesus was a human being, a great man, a real person—he wasn't some demi-god when he was alive. He sweat real blood and cried real tears on that cross. A good man, a great teacher, a prophet for God.

Yes, a good man, a great man, a remarkable teacher, a prophet of God—a real honest-to-God human being.

But that's NOT all. That's the enigma! That's the paradox! That's the hard thing for our minds to grasp.

Listen to these ancient words of the Nicene Creed as they struggle to get hold of the inexplicable: *“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, Begotten, not made, of one being with the Father;*

Through him all things were made,

For us and our salvation

He camewas incarnate of the Holy Spirit...and became fully human.”

What sense do you get when you hear this affirmation of the reality of the Christ?

Are the descriptive role words of teacher and prophet and great man sufficient? No...not enough. There is a sense of transcendence here—of a greater reality and presence that, although contained in the human flesh of one true human being—a Son of Man—there is also a reality that pushes our mortal envelope past our ability to grasp—pushes it into divinity. And not just any expression of divinity—but one which fully encompasses all of God.

There are other ancient words we use to express this understanding. We know them so well we don't really hear or reflect on them either—they're just old, well worn church words. Three words: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Try Creator, Redeemer and Spirit of the Living God.

They all add up to the same thing: True God from true God, begotten, not made.

Creatures like you and I are made. This creed implies the Christ was in existence when the foundations of the earth were laid: *"through him all things were made—"*

For who and for what purpose? *"For us and our salvation"!!*

When I was in seminary we called belief like this—the knowledge that Jesus *is* God—the Leap of Faith. It's a big leap.

It's a leap right out into space without any control on our part. But it's the leap every believer is asked to take. The question is how many of us have the courage to do it? Is it really that scary? Depends on what you're holding on to and what you are willing to let go of in order to be caught and lifted back up.

Here are some things we have a hard time letting go of, like gripping the diving board with our toenails:

The idea that Jesus is of God is a scandal and an affront to our intellect—especially for us who are strong on intellectual things. We chafe at the idea of being shackled in any way shape or form in our thinking—smacks of authoritarian control. Smacks of interference with our free will. Smacks of emotionalism—and sentimentality. We are suspicious of these things.

For others it's a matter of compassionate heart anger: if Jesus is the divine savior then why is the world in such a mess? Why do women and children suffer? Why is evil so random and frightening?

For others it's a joke that anyone believes in God in the postmodern world. As in "WHAT DIFFERENCE does God make?" No difference. Therefore there is no God. So why do I don't need God?

Yes, it depends on what you are holding on to that permits you to be in denial: pride, righteous anger, cynicism, arrogance. These things permit us to dismiss God—make God

the problem---without getting too close and personal as in Jesus.

We don't want to have to look at Jesus. He's too much like us. We don't want to have to walk too close to Jesus—

He might speak our name. We might get dirtied up, we might get hurt, and we might get caught up in believing in a power greater than ourselves that loves us and asks us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

A power greater than the universe that became humble and serviceable, and dared to die for us—we don't need that kind of guilt. We don't want to look too close at that kind of God lived humanity.

Well. Then. Let's look a moment at some of the bottom line givens we know to be true about life:

First, the world really is in a mess—we can all agree on that, right? Was there ever in the history of the world a time when earth was not in some kind of a mess?

Second, there is only one way out of it and we are all going there—death, right?

Third, The history of human ingenuity, sacrifice and good works notwithstanding—*human nature—THE NATURE OF THE HUMAN CREATURE*—*that is our tendency to roll down hill, to gravitate*—*away from God's way*—That hasn't changed since Adam and Eve ate that old apple, has it? Not since the mythological day one.

These, as I said are givens—understood realities. Christians can boldly acknowledge these realities because—because they are pessimists? Cynics? Or are so focused on the other world they are no earthly good? No, because Christians aren't in denial about the real state of affairs. They no longer need to be.

You see, we know there is a way out! The only way out! We know the way. The Way is a Who. The Way is Jesus: The Christ of God who opens the future for us with possibilities and abilities far beyond us—but which we can

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participate in and lean back into in trust, in hope and in faith. Which we can live out of –live out of God's reign –in the midst of the reality of mess, fear, death and evil.

In him, in the experience of his personhood, we come to know there is a way out of this old messed up world that results in a new world!

A future that we can participate in RIGHT NOW even as it is still coming into being.... just like the laborers in the vineyard—anyone can receive God's saving grace ANYTIME and it will be as whole and real for us at 5 minutes before sundown as it is for those who receive it at 8 a.m. in the morning.

And not just for today but for all days and all eternity. We know when we meet Jesus we have met the real McCoy—the real God—the one who is simply packaged but who encompasses a not so simple reality. And it is out of that experience, that conviction that we can say for the sake of the drowning world, "You are the Messiah, the Chosen One of God, the Christ."

Let the people say, Amen.