

“Who Do You Say That I Am?”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
August 22, 2020

Matthew 16: 13-20

Debbie and I are empty-nesters. That phrase seems so strange to utter, but it is true. We took Erin and Heather to college last weekend, and for the first time in almost twenty-one years, it’s just the two of us in the house. Of course, that may change again this fall, if Davidson College has to send students home. But in this time of Covid-19, I’ve learned to not make any firm plans and just see what happens tomorrow!

No matter what happens, this milestone in all of our lives impacts our identities in significant ways. Heather is no longer identified as a student living with her parents, but as someone who is forging a new chapter in life away from home. Erin continues to grow into young adulthood with new groups of friends, interests, and explorations of what her life of vocation and service might entail. And for me and Debbie, our lives are no longer defined by school schedules and extra-curricular activities. Instead, we are invited to parent in a totally different way – from afar physically, yet close emotionally – as we also discover anew what this chapter in marriage will be like for us.

We all live through these transitions in life, and experience how they shape and alter our personal identities. When we retire from our job, we are no longer associated with a company or organization; instead, we must seek out a new calling for our lives. When our spouse dies, we are no longer viewed as part of a whole; instead, we must forge a new identity without our loved one by our side. When we move from one city to another, we are no longer identified by a familiar circle of friends; instead, we must work at forming new relationships, telling our story so that others will come to know us for who we are.

As human beings, our identity is formed through relationships, including how we are identified by others. That is one of the first things which came to my mind when I read the beginning of this story from Matthew. Jesus has brought his disciples to a place alone and away from the crowds in Caesarea Philippi. And he questions them, asking, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” They’ve been together now for many months, and they have interacted with many, many people during their travels with this man. On the surface, it appears Jesus is seeking some affirmation of who he is: “What are people saying about me?”

The disciples respond with a multitude of answers: John the Baptist; Elijah; Jeremiah; one of the prophets. I guess folks at that time

believed the servants of the past would rise again, because all of these people are dead! And maybe, the disciples were throwing out names they themselves knew well, and they knew others would believe Jesus was. In a sense, this was the easy question to answer: who do other people say is the Son of Man? It's not so hard to say what others believe.

The hard question comes next: "But who do you say that I am?" I can picture all the disciples sitting there, staring at the ground, fiddling with the stones, not wanting to look directly at their master and teacher. "What do I believe?" they probably asked. That's a much more difficult question to answer than, "What do others believe?"

Throughout my years of being a student, I always hated being called upon. I would do all my homework, be as prepared as I could be, and sit there trying my darndest not to make eye-contact with the teacher. If I was sitting in a small group or seminar discussion, I was in my worst nightmare, because there was no place I could hide. I might be extremely well-prepared and know all the information we were going to cover, but I did not want to be called on. Why? Because I feared giving the wrong answer, and consequently looking like a fool.

Maybe that was what was going through the minds of the disciples when Jesus asked them directly, "Who do you say that I am?" They didn't want to say the wrong thing. They didn't want to disappoint their master. They didn't want to fail.

Leave it to Peter to not worry about those things. "You are the Messiah," Peter said, "the Son of the living God." Peter didn't care if he was wrong. Peter didn't care if he failed. Peter just blurted out what he believed: this Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah for Israel and the world.

That took a lot of courage for Peter to say, and Jesus affirms him for taking that risk: "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." Peter's answer is a statement of faith, a pronouncement of what he believes, who he believes, and why he believes. And he says it in front of his friends and master - in public, not to himself - and with that pronouncement he lays out his faith for all to see.

Whenever we make such a public, personal statement, it is much different than things we think to ourselves. Fred Craddock reflects on this in a sermon he preached entitled, "Speak Up and Be Quiet:"

I still think about things I have said, things I have said in public. The things we say in public are really important, and I spend a lot of time thinking about them. Once I said in front of a bunch of boys and some men, "On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country."

Once in a court I was scared spitless when a fellow came up to me and stuck out a Bible and said, "Put your left hand here and raise your

right hand. Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to give is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God?" "Yes sir," I replied.

Lots of times I have said, "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America." I have said that in front of people. I remember one day, the most frightened I ever was in my life, forty-nine years ago, the minister said, "Will you have this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?" I finally found the words to say, "I will," but I spent a lot of time thinking about that. Do you think about the things you say afterward? They just stay with you. There is something about making a statement in public that makes it a kind of commitment. I said those things in front of other people.

But none of those things I have said in public, none of them, is as hard as saying, "I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God." The Messiah, the Son of God! I do not know now [what] all they mean, but I do know they mean this: I believe Jesus of Nazareth is the one God sent. I believe that Jesus is the one we have been looking for. I believe that Jesus has come for us and for our salvation as an expression of the love of God. I believe that.

And the son of the living God? Yes, I believe that. I do not know about the mechanics of divinity and things like that, and when people talk to me about it, I discover they do not really know either. But I do know this: I believe that Jesus is the expression of who God is. Do you want to know what God is like? Jesus is what God is like. He is the revelation of God's nature. You see, it is not enough to say, "I believe in God," or "I believe there is a God." People hate in the name of God. People kill in the name of God. People are prejudiced in the name of God. What kind of God do I believe in? This kind: I believe in the God who is presented in Jesus Christ, not just some vague little feeling that crawls around in my heart that makes me say, "You know, I feel kind of funny. I think I must have faith." No, no, no.

What is God like? Here's the answer: Jesus. Do you remember the time when there was a crowd gathered to hear Jesus and they were a long way from home and hungry, and Jesus fed them? That is what God is like. Do you remember when he took those little children on his lap and blessed them and talked to them and talked to their parents? That is what God is like. Do you remember when the leper came up to Jesus and said, "Please help me," and he was made clean and healed? That is what God is like.

I do not want you to think that to be a Christian you have to believe in God and then you add Jesus. You do not add anything; it is Jesus Christ who tells us who God is. This is the kind of God in whom we believe. Do you remember that time when Jesus was with the disciples and they were arguing about who was the chairman and who was the greatest? Jesus took a towel and a bowl of water, knelt down in

front of them, and washed their feet. Do you remember that? That is what God is like.

Do you remember when he took that old cross on his shoulder and started up the hill to Golgotha? That is what God is like (*The Cherry Log Sermons*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, © 2001: 37-41).

I've always wondered why Jesus told his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. Maybe they weren't ready to share that knowledge with everyone. Perhaps he knew it wasn't time to share this message with the world. Or maybe he knew that words don't always carry the same weight as actions do. His actions on Good Friday and Easter Sunday would tell the world very clearly who he was. The disciples' actions of the early church - their teaching, their healing, their martyrdom - would tell the world very clearly who he was. It is one thing to make a profession of faith that Jesus is Lord. It is another thing to live out that profession each day of your life.

How do we live out our profession of faith in our daily lives? In the choices we make? In the way we treat our neighbor? In the perspective through which we view our world? In the small and large acts of life, how do our actions reflect our words of faith?

In our life as the church, how do we live out our public profession of faith? In the ministries we engage in? In our level of commitment and support to those ministries? In our invitation to outsiders and our community? In all of these things and more, how do our actions reflect our words of faith?

When Jesus asks us, "Who do you say that I am?" what is our response? What are we ready to say - not privately, but publicly, both in our words and our actions? I pray that as individuals, as a community of faith, as a society, we might boldly and humbly proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God; and then live every day as if our lives depended solely on that single, profound statement.

To God be the glory, now and forever. Amen.