

If you've been around lately, you've seen me working through big questions that implanted themselves during all that rock stacking on sabbatical. There's a lot of time and quiet out there, and I was a sort of captive audience for whatever questions popped into my head. The biggest of 'em, though, is a kinda echo of the same question Jesus just asked: who do you say that I am? Not me. Jesus. Who do you say Jesus is? I know, seems like a softball. Maybe if I didn't have hour after hour, day after day alone with my thoughts, maybe it would've been easier to answer. But, the more time I spent out there, the harder that question got.

We'll come back to that. We should probably talk about the actual story first. This gospel scene follows a couple of miracles. Jesus fed 4,000 people with almost nothing, he got a good dig in on the Pharisees, and he gave a blind man sight. On the way to the next town, he asks his disciples who other people say he is and who they say he is. It doesn't go well. They say he's the Messiah, he says don't tell anyone. Peter says he shouldn't have to suffer, and Jesus says "get behind me, Satan."

A lot of hay's been made about this passage. Why wouldn't Jesus want his identity revealed? And why was he so mean to Peter? We don't really get answers to those questions in scripture. Some scholars think Jesus didn't want anyone to know he was the Messiah because "it was not yet his time," which sounds insightful, but doesn't actually say all that much. One group thinks he didn't want people to know because he didn't like crowds and being known as the Messiah would draw more people to him. That doesn't make a lick of sense, considering he's around crowds all the time and is all for drawing people to himself. Yet another group thinks he doesn't want people to see him as the Messiah because the Messiah, according to all the scriptures before, was supposed to be a militaristic figure, and Jesus is anything but. Ok, what about poor ol' Peter? Maybe Jesus was testing him. Maybe Peter needed the reminder of his impermanence. Maybe Jesus finally accepted his fate and needed his friends to keep him on track instead of telling him he could get out of it. There's lots of blanks in scripture that'd be more helpful if we could fill 'em in. But we can't, not with certainty, and that's tough. Sometimes it's kinda fun. You can explore those avenues of ambiguity and end up with new insights. But if clarity is what you're looking for, the Bible isn't always gonna help.

Ok, with all that said, let's go back to that big question: who do you say Jesus is? How we answer this says a lot about who we are. Is he the Messiah? Depends on what you mean. Is he the violent revolutionary that'll free God's people from the rule of an invading empire? That's what scripture says the Messiah will be, but Jesus won't even let his followers raise a sword. Maybe that's why he didn't want the Disciples telling people he was the Messiah: it'd give 'em the wrong idea.

But what else? Zoom out from this story, and who is Jesus? He's a man of his time, revolutionary but peaceful, strict in religious ideals, Jewish under Roman rule, in his early 30s. Depending on how you translate it, he's a carpenter, a stone mason, or an artisan. Single, probably. Not exactly homeless but on such a long walkabout that he might as well be. Not particularly good looking but not hideous either. In a lot of ways, he was a regular guy, and in many, he was extraordinary. Some'll say he's undoubtedly the Son of God. But the moniker "son of God" already had a meaning in the Judaism of the time. Anyone that was righteous enough could be called "son of God," including some of the prophets, kings, princes, priests, and--as the "children of god"--the entirety of the Hebrew people. References to God as his Father also wouldn't've been rare. Isaiah, Deuteronomy, 2nd Samuel, and Psalm 89 all call God "Father." So,

depending on what you mean by “Son of God,” yes, but also maybe extra yes? What else? It’s hard to unpack who a person is that you know, even harder for someone who lived 2,000 years ago. But we can look at the stories told about him and figure some things out. He healed the sick. He fed the hungry. He railed against inequality, and he desperately wanted the people to follow God the way they said they would. He also knew just how easy it was to justify oneself out of living by those precepts.

Right about now, I expect you’re beginning to wonder why I’m talking about all this. We know who Jesus is, right? Maybe. But I’m not convinced that everyone who says they follow Jesus does know. So, I wanna suggest an experiment. If it’s at all possible, forget everything you’ve been taught about Jesus or Christianity or religious history. Everything you’ve been taught about who he is, from me or anyone else, set it aside for a minute. Don’t get rid of it altogether, but for right now, set it aside. What’s left? Pretty much just scripture. With all the doctrines, dogmas, creedal statements, and theological arguments stripped away, who remains? With that one Sunday School teacher’s insights, that favorite preacher’s best sermons, that news anchor’s spin, Niebuhr or Aquinas or Tickle and their writings, with all that and more gone, who do you say Jesus is? It’s kinda hard to answer, right? Not the memorized “arrows in your quiver” or a go-to elevator pitch for Christianity, but the full, honest, unsanitized, and challenging Jesus...he’s kinda hard to describe directly, so I want to come at this question a little backwards.

The experiment continues. Take an argument from modern Christians and put it in the mouth of Jesus. It’s a great test for just how Jesus-y or not these arguments really are. Take any modern policy or theological claim and try it out. For example, imagine Jesus saying this: “Whoever welcomes one of these little ones in my name might be letting in a murderer.” “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. You made me entitled and lazy.” “Do unto others as you fear they might do unto you.” “Of course I can heal your sickness, but who would pay for it?” Sound weird? God, I hope it sounds weird.

Y’all, we’ve got, like, 50 days until the election. That’s an Easter Season’s worth of chances to weigh out who is who. I know people are gonna have different ideas around which policies to support and why. But if you say you make your political decisions because of your faith, be honest about it. For what it’s worth, I’m including myself in this. It’s really easy to be disingenuous with the application of Jesus’ teaching, REALLY easy. Be honest about it to yourself and to those you speak with. Do you support something because Jesus actually really truly said to? Or do you support something in spite of what Jesus said? You do you. We can vote however we choose. But we can’t claim to vote how we vote because of some made up Jesus head canon. Who do people say Jesus is? Who do you say Jesus is? And who was Jesus, really? Try that test of putting claims in his mouth, and you just might begin to see where our world has twisted Christianity away from a way of life modeled on love and generosity to a tribal identity with few beliefs based on Christ’s actual teaching. In other words, are people Christian because of what Jesus actually taught, or do they claim to be Christian for some other reason?

Jesus says he’s ashamed of those who are ashamed of his teaching. As a representative of this faith of ours, I gotta say, that weighs real heavy, and it makes the question--“who do you say that I am?”--especially tough. Who I say Jesus is better line up with who Jesus is, same for all of us. Y’all know I’ve got some hypocrisy stuck in my craw these days over non-Christlike folks claiming to be Christian for the, I don’t know, status? Cultural cache? Chance to woo a voting block? We’re facing a lot of choices in our lives, not just come election time. We’ve got a whole world that needs actual Christ-like actions. We need that love, that kindness, that peaceful demeanor. We need hard truth, and we need soft hearts. Where Jesus fed, we feed. Where Jesus welcomed, we welcome. Where Jesus loved, we love. Day in and day out,

we're facing the choice between following Jesus and following something else. That's your choice, but only one side of it's Christian. When the world offers us Barabas, Judas, Pilate, or Jesus, why would Christians choose anything but Jesus? I'm not saying any of the candidates are Jesus, I'm just saying that we can't let fear, worry, security, anger, income, justifications, cleverness, selfishness, money, or any other excuse replace Christ in Christianity any more. We're about Jesus here, and that means--among quite a few other things--that means we're about compassion, truth, and service. We're about the actual Jesus, not a mascot for our club but the model for how we live. And we're about love, real, self-sacrificing, world-altering love.

If it's not that, then who do you say Jesus is?