

## Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up?

Matthew 16:13-20

Some of you may remember an early television quiz show and my mother's favorite TV show, "What's my Line?" There were three persons, each claiming to be the one who had accomplished something interesting or noteworthy (their "line" of work). Panelists asked a series of questions to the three, and then voted for the one they thought most likely to be telling the truth. Following the voting, the host, I think it was John Daly, would ask, "Will the real \_\_\_\_\_ please stand up?"

There are times when it feels to me as if we need to ask, "Will the real Jesus please stand up"! There are denominations / divisions within the Church that provide detailed lists of beliefs about Jesus, and then suggest that only if one subscribes to their particular doctrine, their particular theological understandings, will we know the real Jesus...The Church of the Brethren tradition has long believed that doctrine, that theology alone is not enough to know the real Jesus - that Jesus is seen and known by his disciples by imitating, by modeling his life of compassion and grace, his mercy and self-giving love. Alexander Mack, the early leader of the Brethren, was asked, "How will the members of this new church be known?" He responded, "By the manner of their living."

"We will be known by the manner of our living"...But what do we do, when those who claim to be followers of Jesus find themselves embracing diametrically opposed manners of living?

There was a TV special several years ago – actually now many years ago - that intended to explore "mainstream" America's view of the war in Iraq. One person interviewed made the statement, "I am a Christian; of course, I support the President of our country and his leadership of the war." While other Christians questioned our nation's reliance upon military solutions as the answer to deep-seated divisions and brokenness in our world.

Still another group, who identified themselves as Christians, picketed outside a funeral service for a soldier killed in Iraq who happened to be gay with signs that read, "Another homo dead; God is pleased". In contrast to this demonstration, others claiming to be followers of Jesus, were appalled at any who would assert that love for Jesus leads to hatred of any group of people. They believe that because compassion is at the heart of Jesus, Christians are called to affirm all peoples as fellow children of God.

How is it that persons who claim to be followers of the same Jesus can find themselves on such opposite ends of the spectrum? Are we not tempted to ask, "Will the real Jesus please stand up?"...If the real Jesus did indeed stand before us, would we recognize him? If the Jesus we follow is not challenging some of our most favorite assumptions about life, it just could be that we are not following the real Jesus!

Jesus came proclaiming a new reality - life under the rule of God, the kingdom of God. Jesus came asking not just, "What do you believe *about* me?" but "Are you willing to *follow* me? Are you willing to deny self, take up the cross, and walk with me in the ways of discipleship?" It was not just a question of "Do you agree with me?", but much more, Jesus asked those first believers, "Are you ready to join with me in living and proclaiming a new way of living?" Indeed, the first Christians were known, not as people of right doctrine, not as people of one particular experience, but as people of "the way" - people willing to journey with Christ on the road of discipleship. And if you and I are to be true to the gospel today, it must be the same for us as well. More than intellectually agreeing with a set of beliefs, Christ's gospel involves truth that must be embraced and owned, accepted and embodied - lived out in all our relationships along the journey of life.

This morning's Gospel lesson represents a key turning point for Jesus and the disciples. Up to this point, Jesus has been teaching and healing, inviting people to open their eyes to a new reality in life. Now it is time to check in, to take the pulse of the people, to discern the extent to which Jesus is being heard and understood. So Jesus takes the disciples well away from their normal area of activity – he takes them to Caesarea Philippi in northern Israel - then asks them, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” “Who do people say I am?”

The disciples report the general reaction of the people, “Some say John the Baptist; others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah”. It's clear that few see Jesus in the way he is sometimes portrayed today, as the “gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” Instead, as one commentary put it, “They see Jesus as one of the wild prophets of recent or ancient times, who had stood up and spoke God's word fearlessly against wicked and rebellious kings...Jesus was acting as a prophet: not simply ‘one who foretells the future,’ but one who was God's mouthpiece against injustice and wicked.”

Then Jesus pushes deeper, asking a critical follow-up question of the disciples, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” Jesus is not asking, “Who does your next-door neighbor say that I am?” Nor is Jesus asking, “Who do nine out of ten mainstream Americans say that I am?” Rather, Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” And Peter, speaking for the group, affirms the conviction that is at the heart of the New Testament, that while Jesus is a prophet, he is much more. Peter proclaims, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

The Irish speak of “thin places,” sacred sites with mystical qualities – where the veil between this world and another is thin; holy places, where God is especially present; where there is little that separates God’s presence from humankind. Perhaps Peter’s confession represents a “thin moment,” a moment of unusual insight, one of those times of extraordinary awareness of the presence of God. Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel the disciples had already affirmed, after seeing Jesus walking on the turbulent sea, “Truly you are the Son of God” (14:33). Truly you are the one Israel has been waiting for, the one of whom the prophets and the psalmist had spoken.

But the confession Peter now gives moves to yet a deeper level, a “thin” moment of intense spiritual discernment. Peter begins to sense, in a heartfelt way, what it means to walk with Jesus on the journey of discipleship. And indeed, the disciples begin to sense that there is still much more to learn in their relationship with Jesus.

When Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” It is not simply a question of beliefs about Jesus; It is much more, it is an invitation and a challenge, an opportunity to embrace a new way of living, a new set of values and priorities, a new standard for life. It is a question of commitment - will we deny self, take up the cross, and follow Jesus in paths of discipleship? Will we embark upon life in the kingdom of God, life with God at the very center of our living? Will we seek to put on the very character of Jesus - the compassion and self-giving love, the grace and peace, the mercy and loving-kindness of Jesus...in all our relationships?...Is this not what it means to know the real Jesus, to be willing to stake our lives on the promise of God’s gracious love, made visible to us in the gift of Jesus? It is a promise that nothing in life or in death, nothing in all creation, can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

The incredible truth of the gospel is that in Christ, God has taken the initiative. In Christ, God has become one with us, and as we place our trust and faith in Jesus, we are led to a

new way of living. We are no longer living for ourselves all alone. Our world broadens, as we clothe ourselves with compassion and mercy and grace of Jesus. While we cannot now foresee all that God has in store for us, this much we do know - in Christ, God is with us, upholding, encouraging, strengthening, renewing, empowering, redeeming us. And as we experience the transforming power of the gospel, Jesus becomes more and more real - in us and among us. Thanks be to God for the unspeakable gift of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.