

Who do you say Jesus is?

Matthew 16:13-20

Pastor George Carlson

Which do you like better...questions or answers? If you were to ask me, I'd probably say, "It depends. Sometimes I prefer answers, sometimes I prefer questions."

This last week has brought many questions. Solveig's sister-in-law faced an unsuspected health issue early last Sunday morning. What is wrong? Why all this blood? Can they take care of her in Northfield, MN? She ended up at St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester, MN, where she tests showed a problem in the stomach. What is it? Is it cancer? What will be done? She had surgery Tuesday morning. Will she have to undergo chemo therapy? What is her long-term outlook? Then the good news...although the growth was cancerous, no further treatment was needed! Many of you have faced similar questions. At times like that we like questions that help clarify options. Even more, we like answers that we can understand, that give us confidence in the medical professionals and treatment, that provide hope. I like answers that do not sugar coat the truth but tell me straight on what I face, the battle I face to fully recover.

What questions have you faced this past week, questions that you had no choice but to face? Solveig's 95-year-old aunt couldn't eat. She grew weaker and weaker. Tests showed a blood leakage in her intestines and a blockage. Should I have surgery? Should I say no to surgery and yes to death? Should I listen to my only son for advice? What are my chances of pulling through with my past health issues? She answered yes to emergency surgery Tuesday night and came through okay.

What questions did Jesus deal with in his family over health issues? What questions did Jesus struggle with in his day-to-day living? What questions did he ask when he spent 40 days in the wilderness following his baptism? What answers did he get that led him to change the course of his life's work from carpenter to preacher/teacher/healer around age 30?

I wonder about your questions, the issues you face and ponder, seeking answers. I've learned that my questions have changed as I've lived. Go to college or farm with my dad? Should I buy a car? Will I meet someone I'll want to marry? Will taking a teaching job in Britt, IA, be satisfying? What should I have for breakfast? Where was God when dad entered the fog of dementia? Keep working or retire? Big questions. Silly questions. Some with answers. Some with no answers. But they can seem so important when they surface, and how we deal with them, how we answer them can change our days, our years, our present, our future.

In today's gospel we hear two questions. Jesus asked both questions. "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?...But who do you say that I am?" He posed those questions to his disciples who had spent time with him, listening to his preaching and teaching, witnessing his healings and miracles, seeing his growing tensions with those in authority.

Many of us have spent time with Jesus, too, going to worship, reading the Bible, talking with others. We may answer the first question fairly easily, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" We state the Apostles' Creed or quote a scripture verse or tell what someone else has told us or turn to a song or hymn. But what about the second question, "But who do you say Jesus is?" Have you had anyone ask you directly, "Who do you say Jesus is?" I'm asking you today, "Who do you say Jesus is?"

You or I may respond with answers that we've learned, perhaps reciting the Apostles' Creed or Nicene Creed or joining Peter in declaring that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the son of the living God. Those answers have been solid for centuries. Jesus even declared Peter's answer as the rock, the foundation on which the church would grow and stand firm. Those answers are great if you know what they mean. But we live in an increasingly non-Christian culture, so if a person does not know what Messiah means, or Christ, or crucifixion, or resurrection, or eternal life, then do we really help them see and know Jesus?

My understanding of Jesus has developed over nearly 70 years. How I answer "Who do you say Jesus is?" differs from what I would have said 65 or 46 or 22 or 10 years ago. Since I asked you, it seems fair that I share my answers as of today. Who do I say Jesus is?

Jesus is the barrier breaker.

Jesus is the relationship rebuilder.

Jesus is the God google.

Let me explain.

From his birth to his death, Jesus broke down the barriers that people build to keep people out or to keep people in their select group. Foreigners from the east came first to worship the toddler Jesus. The soldier of the Roman occupying army, the enemy, declared at the cross where Jesus died that Jesus was the son of God. Jesus ate with outcasts. He healed the daughter of the scorned Samaritans. Jesus is the barrier breaker, opening my eyes to see that God makes no distinction in pouring out God's love for all people, opening my heart to see all others as precious, valued, created-in-God's image people. Jesus is the barrier breaker.

During his ministry, Jesus touched people whose lives had been broken by disease or fear or oppression. He cast out demons, evil spirits that isolated people. He healed a paralytic that people avoided because they figured God had it against him. He restored a girl to life. He quieted a storm at sea that had

convinced his followers they would perish. You can read more in Matthew's gospel. In all those cases, Jesus restored health and life and community through the power of his presence, through his generous reconciling love. Jesus is the relationship builder.

Finally, Jesus brings God to me. I often use my computer to search for what I want to know or understand more fully. We even have turned a noun, google, into a verb, google. So I have arrived at the point where I go to or google Jesus if I want to know more about God. John put it best in his gospel, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made God known." (John 1:18) People will often say they believe in God. I like to respond by saying, "Tell me about your God." And if I need to hear more, I ask, "How did you come to believe that? What led you to that understanding of God?" That may give me an opportunity to tell about the God I know, and explain how I google Jesus to know God. Like Peter, we can't figure out God on our own. God reveals God's self to us in Jesus so we can believe in the God who breaks barriers and rebuilds relationships. Jesus is the God google.

Peter said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." I like that. We say that in our creeds. But I also know that Peter meant something different by Messiah than what Jesus understood. Peter saw a conqueror, a liberator, a restorer of the greatness of Israel. Jesus understood the bringer of God's kingdom as a suffering servant, willing to die rather than quit loving and suffering on behalf of others. Jesus affirmed Peter's insight and then declared that would serve as the foundation, the rock on which the church would grow. Then Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom to his followers, equipping us to do his work of opening the kingdom to others. Who do you say Jesus is? How we answer that question shapes our lives.

Our lip service leads to life service, loving and suffering on behalf of others like Jesus.

Yes, Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God. Who do you say Jesus is? I say:

Jesus is the barrier breaker.

Jesus is the relationship builder.

Jesus is the God google.

Who do you say Jesus is?