

North Kildonan United Church

27th August 2023 ~Rev. Susan Reed

“Who Do You Say that I Am?”

Psalm 138

Matthew 16: 13-20

This past Spring, I had job interviews for the first time in a long time. In fact, it had been almost 25 years. It was the process which eventually brought you and I together, but it felt like strange and unusual territory for me. I was nervous. The national church provided a list of some of the questions which might be asked in interviews, and I tried to figure out how I might respond. I also tried to anticipate additional questions I might be asked, and my potential responses to those. I must say, there was one question I was more apprehensive about than all of the rest. That question? “Tell us about yourself.” Now, thankfully, I wasn’t asked that question, at least not as open-endedly. It’s a hard one to answer. What would I include? What would I leave out? What would be appropriate for this particular context? Would it be an answer the interviewers would find helpful for their work? Would it be authentic to who I am? It was a hard question to imagine answering. For a whole lot of reasons, I think it’s always hard to talk about identity.

And this morning’s Gospel reading is all about identity.

It’s been a little while since Jesus first called his disciples. They’d had some time together to get to know each other. They’d traveled together, they’d shared meals together, and they’d shared in experiences of miracles and healings. They’d seen large crowds fed, they’d seen Jesus heal folks who were ill, and they’d seen him still a storm AND walk on water. The disciples had time to learn from Jesus, as he shared stories and parables and teachings about God and God’s kingdom.

They’d had all of this time to not only learn *from* Jesus, but also to learn *about* Jesus. And so, as we heard in this morning’s reading, Jesus seemed to put that to the test. And he did that through two questions. First, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” The disciples gave various answers of what they were hearing from others – “Some say John the Baptism, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Then, in what I feel is the heart and core of the passage, Jesus asked – “But who do you say that I am?” Who do YOU say that I am?

Can you imagine the disciples being asked this? Does it sound like a trick question, or a question with a right answer?

Scripture tells us that Simon Peter answered Jesus’ question. He said, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus responded by blessing him, calling him Peter, which means “rock,” and saying that on that rock, Jesus would build his church. It would

seem that Peter gave the answer Jesus was seeking, or hoping to hear from his disciples. Or, was he affirming that Peter answered the question at all, naming how he understood Jesus, and not just how others understood him?

Questions of who Jesus is have been central questions in the Christian tradition for as long as it has existed. They are questions which have caused debates, arguments, and even divisions within the church. They are questions which have been wrestled with by scholars, authors, hymnwriters. They are questions which we have attempted to articulate in credal statements.

As I was reflecting on Jesus' questions, I found myself thinking of the faith statements of our denomination.

You may be familiar with 'A New Creed':

"We believe in God: who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new..."

'A Song of Faith' is the newest faith statement of The United Church of Canada, adopted in 2006. It's a poetic statement which uses the image of our faith as a song we sing. It's a much lengthier statement than our previous creeds and statements of faith. It has quite a section on Jesus, and I'd like to take the time to read it this morning. Of Jesus, it says:

"We find God made known in Jesus of Nazareth,
and so we sing of God the Christ, the Holy One embodied.

We sing of Jesus, a Jew,
born to a woman in poverty
in a time of social upheaval and political oppression.
He knew human joy and sorrow.
So filled with the Holy Spirit was he
that in him people experienced the presence of God among them.
We sing praise to God incarnate.

Jesus announced the coming of God's reign –
a commonwealth not of domination but of peace, justice, and reconciliation.
He healed the sick and fed the hungry.
He forgave sins and freed those held captive
by all manner of demonic powers.
He crossed barriers of race, class, culture, and gender.
He preached and practiced unconditional love –
love of God, love of neighbour, love of friend, love of enemy –
and he commanded his followers to love one another as he had loved them.

Because his witness to love was threatening,
those exercising power sought to silence Jesus.
He suffered abandonment and betrayal,
state-sanctioned torture and execution.
He was crucified.

But death was not the last word.
God raised Jesus from death,
turning sorrow into joy, despair into hope.
We sing of Jesus raised from the dead.
We sing hallelujah.

By becoming flesh in Jesus, God makes all things new.
In Jesus' life, teaching, and self-offering, God empowers us to live in love.
In Jesus' crucifixion, God bears the sins, grief, and suffering of the world.
In Jesus' resurrection, God overcomes death.
Nothing separates us from the love of God.

The Risen Christ lives today, present to us and the source of our hope.
In response to who Jesus was and to all he did and taught,
to his life, death, and resurrection,
and to his continuing presence with us through the Spirit,
we celebrate him as
the Word made flesh,
the one in whom God and humanity are perfectly joined,
the transformation of our lives,
the Christ."

Whether in shorter form or longer form, much energy, time, care, and intention has been put into trying to answer the questions of who Jesus was, who Jesus is, and who Jesus is for us. These statements can help us in articulating who Jesus is. And yet, I believe we might be called to more. Is it possible that the voice of Jesus says, "Who does the world say that I am? Who do your creeds and faith statements say that I am?... But who do YOU say that I am?" It's almost as though we're being encouraged to not just lean on words others have said or written, but say – and confess – for ourselves who Jesus is.

This is a huge question, and it's central to our faith. If we profess to be followers of Jesus, who is it that we are following? If we profess to be disciples of Christ, who is this Christ? I believe that these questions don't just point us to Jesus' identity, but also our own. Our identity as Christian people, as followers of the Way – both individually and as church – is absolutely connected to who we understand Jesus to be, and what we understand Jesus to be about.

Scripture doesn't tell us if anyone besides Peter dared to offer an answer to Jesus' question. I can imagine the other disciples maybe saying 'Phew,' when Peter stepped in with a response. It took them off the hook, so to speak. Or perhaps they were nodding in agreement, as if to say, 'Yeah, what he said.' We don't know...

But when Peter professed that Jesus was the Messiah, the son of the living God, the focus shifted to Jesus and his response. "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church..."

Drawing on the Greek, this is a bit of a play on words. You are Peter (*Petros*), and on this rock (*Petra*) I will build my church. And the church (*ekklesia*) doesn't speak of buildings or structures, but is a term which means "called out." The church is the body which is "called out" into the world by Jesus.

In the words of the Rev. Dr. Cheryl Lindsay, "We are all Peter. We are all called to be the church as we are going into the world."

This church would be built on the rock that was Peter – an imperfect disciple, who didn't recognize Jesus even as he walked on the water towards him, who later would deny that he knew Jesus at all. The church would be built on the rock that was Peter's testimony and witness: "You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God."

As Peter made a statement about Jesus' identity, so he did he find his own identity was changed. No longer Simon, son of Jonah, but now Peter, the rock.

We are invited to both consider and name for ourselves who Jesus is. It's a hard yet important task for us as individuals, and as church. And I'm not sure that we are asked for 'the right answer' as much as we are asked for a heartfelt one, one which is authentic, and true to our experience of Jesus. As we attempt to articulate such a response, we too, might find that our identity shifts as a result of who we know and understand and claim and profess Jesus to be. Life in Christ is transformative. And our identity is bound up in his. So who do we say that Jesus is? Who do you say that Jesus is? On Peter's profession, and on ours, the church will be built.

As we live into our lives of discipleship, as we go out into the world, as we are called out into the world, as we continue to learn what it means to be followers of the Way of Jesus, we continue to hear this question: "Who do YOU say that I am." Perhaps it's a question we can continue to wrestle with together, as we journey on in faith. Amen.