

12th Weekend after Pentecost Reflection

Isaiah 51:1-6

Psalm 138

Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

Grace to you and peace from God our father, our lord and savior Jesus Christ, and the giver and sustainer of our faith, the Holy Spirit.

“Who do they say that I am?” Jesus asks his disciples. The same question could be asked of us. Who do the people we see on TV or hear on the radio say that Jesus is? Who do our friends and neighbors say Jesus is? Who do our family members say Jesus is?

Because if we listen to all of these people, there are as many if not more answers than the disciples gave. John the Baptist. Elijah. Jeremiah, or another prophet. “The conquering hero.” “The one who will give me anything I want.” “The one who will get vengeance for me over my enemies.” “The one who will punish me for everything I do wrong.” “The one who hates me because I *am* wrong.” “The one who hates *them* because they are wrong.” All answers I have seen on my social media feeds in the past week.

So when Jesus asks his next question, “But who do *you* say that I am?” the stakes are high. I don’t think Jesus is just conducting a pop quiz for fun, but to draw the disciples’ attention to this question of identity. Competing answers are swirling around the air of Jesus’ first century disciples and his twenty-first century disciples. And today, Jesus asks us that question, but that is also the question of evangelism. Who do we say to our neighbors, friends, family members, and strangers that Jesus is? Because our neighbors, friends, family, and strangers are hearing all those same competing answers, too. Peter, bold Peter, answers “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” What does “messiah” mean? I wonder if that isn’t why Jesus tells the disciples not to tell anyone yet. Jesus needs time to *show* what “messiah” means because we human beings are bound to misunderstand.

At the time the gospel of Matthew was written, there was a popular interpretation of all the events surrounding Jesus called “Gnosticism.” *Gnostic* is Greek for “knowing,” and this was a sect that claimed secret knowledge Jesus had withheld from those who followed him. Gnosticism claimed that they alone could follow the clues to figure out the *truth* behind what Jesus was *really* about. And they took support from memories like this, where Jesus did command secrecy, as they took these words out of context. This interpretation was eventually labeled a heresy, but it’s a heresy that has proven remarkably resilient; humans are fond of the idea that only *my* small group can figure out the truth, and anyone who says or

has evidence of anything to the contrary is part of the illusion. I think it's a part of our sinful condition.

So we land in a strange place. A strange place between the competing voices of who Jesus is and the trepidation about joining some of these conversations, and the side of secret knowledge, only for the select few worthy. It's a strange question of evangelism, no doubt. But it's also a question of our identity.

We call ourselves "Christians," ones who follow Christ. This question of who do we say Jesus is, is also the question of who do we say we are. And in next week's reading, Jesus is going to give us his answer. But it's not the answer any of the disciples were expecting. Jesus agrees with Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, but then Jesus explains that "Messiah, the Son of the Living God," means the one who suffers and dies on a cross. It means the one who is vulnerable and weak in all our earthly measures of power. It means the one who is killed by the state and transforms death into life.

And that's not an answer that we come up with on our own. It's not an easy answer. Jesus doesn't seem much like the superheroes we see in our popular stories, or like the famous kings from history. Jesus gives us a new picture of what glory looks like. And it's vulnerable. It's scary. It certainly doesn't sound like good marketing. But it is the way of life. It is the way that God chooses to be present in the world. It is the way that God sees, God who sees far more than we can even imagine. God who is far beyond our earthly understanding. God who loves this earth more than we can imagine.

"You are the Messiah," Peter answers. This answer tells us about Jesus, yes, but it is also the answer that we are called through our baptism to live. To tell with our lives that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who saves us. Peter is going to spend the rest of his life struggling with and accepting that answer. And we are called to do so as well. Jesus is the one who saves us. And that's an answer the world needs to see and hear.