

Lectionary 21 Year A 2020
August 23, 2020

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and Jesus our Messiah. Amen.

This question that Jesus asks today is a pretty standard question. “Who do people say that I am?” Or “Who do you say that I am?” If I were to ask that question, I would get different responses based on who I asked. We each carry with us a variety of identities. In some situations, I am pastor, other times, I am customer or client, I’m also a mom and a wife. Starting in March, with the coronavirus, I became an elementary school teacher as well. I’m also a daughter, sister, aunt, niece, cousin, and friend. When we answer the question, “Who do you say that I am?”, we answer with these identities, and these identities identify or define a relationship. In fact, you cannot answer this question without talking about a relationship.

So, when Jesus asks the question, “Who do people say that I am?”, he’s trying to figure out if the world understands the relationship he has with them. Have they figured it out yet? And the disciples respond that people think Jesus is like John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah. They understand him to be a prophet or a teacher. In asking this question, Jesus learns that the world doesn’t get it yet. They have defined a relationship, but it is not quite the relationship that Jesus was sent into the world to have. The world doesn’t yet understand who Jesus is.

But then Jesus asks the disciples another question. “Who do *you* say that I am?” Peter responds, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Peter gets it. Or at least he says the right thing. You see, in next week’s gospel reading, we’ll find out that even Peter and the disciples don’t quite understand exactly who Jesus is and what he’s here for. But at least for now, they have identified the relationship correctly.

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” That’s a pretty good statement of who Jesus is. The problem is that there’s still a question left unanswered. We can proclaim that all we want. We say something very similar to that in the Apostle’s Creed each week. But these words are deep and complicated and rarely used in today’s world. By simply providing this answer in today’s world, we’re still missing something.

You see, the part that’s missing is the answer to the question, “What does that mean? What does it mean that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God? So what? Why does it matter?” Because the answer to *that* kind of question is powerful. The answer to that question has the power to transform our lives.

Peter doesn’t answer the question for us in our gospel today; maybe even he wasn’t entirely sure what it means that Jesus was the Messiah. But I’d like to challenge each of you to take some time and think about your answer to this question. And the beauty of it is that because the question is about relationships, every one of our answers will be different. Every one of us has a different relationship with God, every one of us experiences God in a different way and at different times. So, when each of us answers this question, “What does it mean that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God?” every answer will be different—and there’s no danger of your answer being wrong.

So, I challenge you to take some time this week and sit down with this question. Pray about it, ponder it, listen for God. Then write down a sentence or two, a journal entry, or whatever it takes to answer the question, “What does it mean that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God?” These answers have power, and it just might give a new spark to your life of faith. Especially in the midst of the pandemic, when we’ve been away from one another for so long, reconnecting with this question is important for our faith.

Now, I know this might be challenging, so I’ll go first. I took some time this week to answer that question, and my answer goes something like this:

What does it mean that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God?

It means God sent God's own self into the world so that we might know exactly how much God loves us. And the answer is that God loves us more than we can ever know. And that love doesn't end when we make a mistake, or turn away, or get angry at God. It means that God loves me even when I have a hard time loving myself. It means God forgives me when I can't forgive. It means that when we are isolated from one another, and our hearts ache because someone has to suffer alone, we have the comfort of knowing that God is there, and that God knows that pain. It means that when it feels like no one else understands, God does. It means that when it feels like you can never be good enough at whatever it is you're trying to do, you're always good enough for God. This is the love God has for us. This is the love God shows to us in Jesus our Messiah.

But God incarnate as Jesus Christ the Messiah is more than that too. God shows us how much God loves us, but God also shows us what that love can do. In Jesus, God's love works wonders. Rather than give into the threat of violence, Jesus spoke up. Rather building walls to keep the outcasts away, Jesus crossed boundaries and built relationships. Rather than let people starve because there's not enough to go around, Jesus fed people who were hungry. Jesus refused to be satisfied or limited by the status quo, and Jesus invites us to do the same. Because through Jesus' life death and resurrection, we see not only the abundance of God's love for us, but we also experience love that is more powerful than hate and fear and even death. Jesus shows us, that God's love is enough, and God's love conquers all in every time and every place.

So that's my answer. It's personal, it speaks to my life experience, and it tells of Jesus' presence in the world I know. This week, it's your turn. What does it mean to you that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God? These answers don't have to be perfect, and they don't have to be very long, and they don't have to say absolutely everything. When I look back at my answer, I'm sure it could say more about salvation and eternal life, or more about God's response to the trouble in the world, or more about community and church. But when I sit down and think about the question by asking what it means or why it matters, it gives me strength and assures me as I grow in understanding of the relationship that God has with me through Jesus Christ the Messiah.

This question is all about relationships. "Who do you say that I am? And what does that mean?" This is a question that we began to answer in baptism. Because in baptism, we began a new relationship with God as God's children. We were transformed by the water that washed over our head and body. And we continue to be transformed by the Word that works forgiveness and salvation upon us throughout our lives. As we go throughout life, and live into our faith and calling as children of God, God transforms our lives, and our relationship with God changes and grows.

And so, as we go through life, our answer to this question changes, because God is constantly at work in our lives. In Romans, Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." This is a transformation that began when we entered into relationship with God through baptism, and that transformation grows deeper and more complex throughout life. And from that point forward, as God continues in relationship with us, God is transforming our lives, one moment at a time.

And just because we've answered the question, and we confess Jesus as Messiah, doesn't mean we will always have the right answers or act perfectly according to God's will. Again, we have the example of Peter who in just a few verses will slip up once again. But at the very least, we fall back on the promise of God's love for us, which is at the base of these questions, and we know that despite our failings, Jesus Christ is still the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and through him, God will always be there to forgive us, and transform us with God's love once more. Thanks be to God. Amen.