

Lectionary A August 24, 2014, the 11th Sunday after Pentecost
Grace and Peace Lutheran Church, Evansville, IN
Roberta Meyer

Isaiah 51:1-6
Psalm 138:1-8
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:13-20

A Risky Question

But, who do you say I am?

Jesus is asking his disciples this question. “Why are you here with me? Why did you leave everything you have to go traipsing around the desert with me? Who do you think I am? Who am I to you?”

Jesus identity is at the crux of most of the stories in the Gospels. That’s what we heard at VBS this weekend. We learned about the story in Mark, where four friends boldly and creatively found a way to get their paralyzed friend close to Jesus. When Jesus started talking about forgiving this man’s sins that started a buzz among the “authorities” of the Jewish Law. “Who does this man think he is? He can’t go around forgiving sins! Only God can do that!”

So what did Jesus do? He answered them, “What do you think is harder to do? Forgive sins or heal? I am going to do both just so you can see who I am.” He forgave the man’s sins and then told him to jump up off that mat and stand on his two feet. He was healed. “Now, do you know who I am?”

Well, it wasn’t that easy. It took lots of miracles and some people still didn’t get it. That is what the children learned in the second story during VBS. Jesus was killed by people who just couldn’t believe he was the “King of the Jews”. Pilot asked Jesus, “*Are you the King of the Jews?*” *Jesus said, “You say so.”* The crowd wouldn’t accept this. “Crucify him!” It was too risky to believe Jesus was the Messiah, the anointed one, the King of the Jews. They didn’t want to face this so they opted to get rid of him. Crucify him!

This week I went to Indianapolis for an overnight retreat given by the IK Synod for the formation of Stewardship leaders. Heather Apel, an assistant to the Bishop, shared her thoughts on another story from the Gospel of Mark about the rich man who wanted to know how he could get to heaven. Jesus told the man, “...go, sell what you own, and give the money^[c] to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” This was too risky because this man had lots of stuff. The story ends with this statement: “*When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*”

Heather said that when she thought of this story she imagined that she was watching this conversation happen and would step up and reaching into her pockets saying, “Here Jesus, I will give you what I have.”

She would pull out all her money and hand it over to Jesus. Jesus would be grateful and ask, “What else do you have?”

“Well, I do have some money in my checking account. I can write you a check.”

“You have a checking account? What’s that?”

“Well, it is money I have in the bank. I write checks when I use that money.”

“Oh, I think you should just give me the whole checkbook.”

So Heather hands over her checkbook. “What else do you have? She emptied her pockets.

“What are those little plastic rectangles?”

“Those are my credit cards. They are what I use to buy things when someone takes my money and my checkbook.”

“Please hand them over to me, Heather.”

She gives Jesus her credit cards.

“What are those little metal things on that ring?”

“Oh, Jesus, those are my car keys. I need them to drive my car.”

“You have a car? You should give me your car. I will take the car keys.”

She removed the car keys from the key ring.

“What’s that other key for?”

“Oh, this is my house key. That’s where I live.”

“You have a house? I will take that, too. Give me your house keys.”

Heather gave Jesus her keys.

“What else do you have? What about that ring on your finger? What is that?”

“This is my wedding ring. It was put on my finger by my husband.”

“You have a husband? Give him to me, too.”

So there was Heather standing there before Jesus. She had given him all her possessions. Jesus gathered them all up and reached out and—gave them back to her. “Heather, these are gifts I give you to use. Use them to bring glory to my name. Use them to serve my flock.”

But, who do you say I am?

Jesus’ identity is at the crux of who we are. When Jesus asked Peter this question, can you imagine the emotion that went swirling through Peter? This is no easy question. It has everything to do with who the Peter thinks Jesus is and who Peter thinks he is.

Be careful how you answer this question. This is risky business. Jesus is not safe. Following Jesus is about putting yourself out there knowing you will be rejected by some. It is about giving all you have to Jesus. There will be judgment and heartache. It is about joining Jesus in his death. There are still people out there yelling, “Crucify him!!! Or her!!! Anyone who boldly follows the radical teachings of this Jesus.”

In this world today, where war rages in the middle east, where domestic violence is a curse and young teenage boys are shot on our streets, where celebrities, like Robin Williams, suffer from depression and commit suicide, where death’s sting is felt in so many ways, what does it mean to answer Jesus’ question? What difference does our answer make? Where do we take a stand? How do we identify ourselves with issues that could change the world?

Who is Jesus? Who am I? Who are you?

The Good News is Jesus went to that cross and died with us in mind, or should I say, with us on his heart. Yes, being his follower means sharing in his death. In Baptism we die with him, then—we are raised with him. We are given the inheritance of eternal life with Jesus!!!! That’s the gift we know is ours. That is what Peter knew in his heart. Notice when he answered Jesus, *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” 17 And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven,”*

Peter’s answer did not come from his brain, it came from the God speaking to his heart. That’s my prayer. That God’s wisdom comes to me and helps me know who Jesus is and that way I know who I am.

But, who do you say I am? Don’t take Jesus question lightly. This morning as we write our prayer requests on the white cards, think about this question. Think about the places where being vulnerable to Jesus, is difficult. What’s hard to relinquish to Jesus?

You may bring your prayer cards with you when you come up for the Lord’s Supper and put them in this basket. As a community we will pray for all our needs on Tuesday evening at 7:00 here in the sanctuary. We are joining in prayer with the people at Emmanuel Lutheran and Christ Lutheran churches. All are welcome.

But, who do you say I am?

Not an easy question and there are risks in answering it. There are demons in our lives that tell us we aren't worthy, or that we don't have what it takes....But feel the joy, and the freedom when, through God's strength and the power of Jesus resurrection we can boldly say to Jesus, *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."* Amen.