

Who do you say that I am?

Jesus asks this question of Peter in our Gospel today, and I suggest that it is the central question of our faith and of our identity as Christians.

Who do you say that I am?

Jesus and Peter had known each other for a while when this question was asked. But what truly did they know and understand about one another at this point in their ministries?

How much do we know about those we share a faith community with? Who do you say that I am? At St. Martin's, we worship together, we speak to one another, we share coffee after church, ---or this summer, some pretty joyous shuttle bus rides, --- - but, as we look around, whom in this room do we really know? What makes the person in the same row with you tick? How do you know what they are truly thinking, what they think about me as I preach, or about you, as you sing and worship together, work on committees with one another, and minister to each another.

Even in our families, in relationships between parent and child, or even our spouses—what do we actually know of the leanings of their hearts or the thoughts of their minds? I hope I am not the only married person here to have experienced that strange phenomenon-- when you look at your spouse, --maybe just a quick glance for a short moment--and you see them, not as a spouse, but as a person, and they almost seemed a stranger? Who truly is this person who I live with, sleep with, and eat with?

It is impossible to completely know another person—we can know some things, intuit more, observe more closely, work on intimacy in our relationships, but in the end, we can see the world from our eyes only, our perspective—and we are, in one sense, only observers of one another's lives. We travel around this earth in our separate bodies, trying to get to know others, coming to know ourselves, and most importantly, trying to know something of the Divine.

Who do you say that I am?

Who are you?

Who am I?

The trouble of identity for the faithful started a long time ago, when the Pharaoh had forgotten who Joseph was, and the Hebrews were being persecuted.

Then Moses was born and as he grew up, I bet Moses asked these identity questions of himself. How would Moses know who he was? Found in the Nile River, taken in by the Egyptians, raised by his sister and nursed by his mother, even after she had

found it necessary to abandon him, adopted and named by the Pharaoh's daughter, and brought up as a prince, not as the Hebrew slave he actually was? Yet he is a focal point for both Hebrew and Christian Holy Scriptures, giving us the basis of our religious identity and defining humankind's relationship with the Divine. Whoever he was and whomever he represents to us, Moses continues to be a pivotal figure in our faith journey and our Salvation history.

Moses was called by God to lead his people, the Hebrews, a job Moses felt incapable of doing. Early on, he did not realize his own potential or come close to understanding the presence of the Divine. After being saved from death by the kindness of a stranger— someone who was actually his enemy—it took him quite a while to figure out who he was.

But then he had his encounter with God. As God spoke to Moses from the burning bush—Moses basically asked--**who are you?** “If I go to the pharaoh, like you are telling me to, who in the world will I say sent me?”

So how did he do it? How did he figure out his role in God's plan for humanity? We see in Moses's story the complexity of identity and knowing oneself, and being courageous enough to take that leap of faith, thereby establishing an everlasting and dynamic relationship with the living God.

Who do you say that I am?

Centuries later than Moses, Jesus asks this question of Simon Peter—and it is still a powerful and life-changing question. Who is Jesus to me, to you right now, in our present time? What is my understanding of God? What is yours? Moses experienced God, first as a burning bush, then a voice, then a presence that would abide with him for the rest of his life. Jesus experienced God as his Father and he too came to abide in God's loving presence, directed by God's will.

But it wasn't a straight or simple path for Moses or for Jesus. Jesus had this band of followers who he had hoped would help him fulfill God's purposes on this earth, but the disciples sometimes did not understand what their role was and couldn't quite figure out Jesus either.

Finally Jesus confronts Simon Peter and asks him the central question of our faith, "Who do people say that I am?". Simon Peter and the others respond, "Some say John, some, Elijah, Jeremiah?" —but wait Simon Peter, Jesus insists, "Who do **you** say that I am?"

Jesus seems genuinely interested in how he is viewed by others—who are sometimes slow to understand the message he is bringing to them. Now he is giving Peter the ultimate test about identity. Peter, who do **you** say that I am?

And then Peter takes his own leap of faith and says, “You are the Son of Living God, You are the Messiah!” Peter has finally understood—he has come to know Jesus, not just as a trusted friend, but as his Savior.

Who do you say that I am? How does this question connect to our lives here and now? I had a connection just recently when a parishioner invited me to a gathering, which was a wonderful gracious invitation. She then said it would be a good way for me to meet people and for them to get to know me. This comment gave me pause for several reasons, and I began to reflect on my presence and ministry in this parish and ponder what it means to be known.

I am an introvert and move fairly quietly around the campus; but I thoroughly enjoy being with you and enjoy being a part of this dynamic faith community. As your deacon, I assume that people do know me. My more active and extraverted role, of course, is in the school as Chaplain. But I love my work here too—working with the Prayer Shawl Ministry and being part of the church staff, making pastoral visits and teaching Sunday School, meeting newcomers and leading Bible studies, even preaching a few times a year.

During my 8 years here, I have come to know quite a lot of people, and I always assumed that you know me. Maybe many are still asking: Who is that woman who reads the Gospel and dismisses us out into the world? She looks familiar, but who is she? What is a deacon anyway?

So I appreciate that my friend’s comment initiated a period of reflection for me about my ministry at St. Martin’s and how to be more fully present, to be who I am. And my reflection leads me back once again to the question Jesus posed to Simon Peter in our Gospel: “Who do you say that I am?”

In a faith community, it is important to be real, to be authentic—to reveal our warts and scars, our pain and our struggles, as well as use our gifts and talents.

Some people choose to reveal very little about who they are, making it more difficult to form a relationship. Even Jesus did this occasionally. After all the discussion in this Gospel about who he is,—, he cryptically says, “Don’t tell anyone that I am the Messiah.” Maybe he, too, was still working to get comfortable with his own place in the world, his own destiny. As Father Graham said a couple of weeks ago, Jesus had to grow into who God made him to be. He wasn’t born knowing what it took to be our friend, our companion on this earthly pilgrimage, our loving Savior, the Son of God. He had to experience the struggle of growing into his ministry. Maybe like Moses, like Peter, and like us, he would still have those moments of reluctance and hesitation to claim his heavenly inheritance.

Who do you say that I am?

My husband is reading a biography of Benjamin Franklin for his book club. Franklin may be an odd choice to weave into my sermon, but my husband read a quote from the book to me this week about Franklin's religious beliefs. On Franklin's deathbed the Reverend Ezra Stiles, president of Yale, asked Franklin to summarize his beliefs and this is how Franklin replied,

Stiles: **"Can you restate your creed regarding the subject of religion?"**

Franklin: ***"I believe in one God, creator of the universe.***

***That He governs it by his providence***

***That He ought to be worshipped***

***That the most acceptable service we render to God is doing good to his other children."***

Then Stiles asked him if he believed in Jesus?

Franklin replied that it was the first time he had ever been asked that—and this is what he said: ***"The system of morals that Jesus provided was the best the world ever saw or is likely to see, I have some doubts as to his divinity; though it is a question I do not dogmatize upon; having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble."***

I appreciate the honesty and humor that Franklin displays about who he thinks Jesus is and what he does or does not understand about him. But most of us are not patient like Franklin to wait until our deaths, when the curtain is lifted, to fully understand. We work hard at knowing Jesus, many of us from childhood; we do study diligently to discern Jesus's place in our lives and attempt to answer Jesus's question time and time again in prayer, study, and worship.

Who do you say that I am?

I think it is also important for us to ask a question of God.

I was at a retreat a few years ago where the tables were turned and the question became, "God, who do you say **that I am**? As we mature into our faith, are we courageous enough to ask of God this question and then welcome the answer? We know God knows every inch of God's creation, God knows us inside and out, knows the leanings of our hearts and the thoughts of our minds, God knows every hair on our heads. So who does God say that I am and who does God say that you are, an essential question, I believe, to reflect on and be inspired by.

I am part of a group called the Micah community, and this group has helped me to stay focused on this question and articulate my identity as a Christian. We meet once a month in Asheville, NC, and as a group have adopted Micah 6:8 as a Rule of life. We meet to hold one another accountable and to support one another in our justice ministries and, as Micah says "the Lord requires" "to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God."

The passage we have today from Romans is also an eloquent and meaningful statement of who we are as Christians and also gives a rule of life for faith communities. The Gospel and the Old Testament lessons pose the questions of identity and, and I think, Romans defines it and answers it—**We are one body with many members, each with gifts differing.**

If we ask God today about our faith community: God, who do you say that we are? What answer would we hear?

Corporately, we are people of faith. We are people of Thanksgiving—that is why we celebrate Eucharist at all our principal services. Today we have our Instructed Eucharist, to help us understand even more deeply the meaning of our liturgy. As individuals in this community, we are committed to following the teachings of Jesus. Benjamin Franklin, remember said, he had not found a better teacher than Jesus nor better teachings, teachings that direct us to love and to serve, to be Good Samaritans, and to live into our Baptism vows to respect the dignity of every human being. Today we are even asked to give blood!

We each have our role to play in this—our gifts differ but not our purpose—we find our unity and our identity in Jesus and his teachings. And as we are so graciously given these gifts, let us honor them and use them to build up the Kingdom of God

This is not a simple or easy way to live. It is intentional. It calls for sacrifices—Romans calls it a living sacrifice. Moses sacrificed much throughout his life—his comfort, his safety, and finally his entrance into the Promised Land—but he finally understood what God required of him. Peter, in his inimitable way did as well, after years of trying to figure out who he was and who Jesus was, finally got it! And was rewarded by being given a new name—and told by Jesus that the church would be built upon his shoulders, a charge that still rests on all the shoulders of the faithful today.

Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for what he believed, the Archetype of self-actualization, of living out one's destiny, according to God's will. He became for us the archetypal example of a life lived in service to others, the world, and to our Creator.

Now, following his example, what is each of us called to do, and to be? What does the Lord require of us? Who does God say that we are? Who does Jesus say that we are? Take this question with you this week—meditate on it, continue to articulate your answer, live out what your faith teaches you; and follow this sacred path wherever it may lead.

Amen