

**Cross Walk:**

2/5 in Series

**Who Do YOU Say that I Am?**

Matthew 16:13-23

03 20 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

**Scripture: Matthew 16:13-23****Who Are You?**

**Who are you?** How do you define and identify yourself? What makes you, YOU? All sorts of elements combine to create personal identity: name, vocation, relationships, race, nationality, politics, school, sports, hobbies, organizations, and more. We describe ourselves in a rich variety of ways.

Who are you? The question of “**who**” is at the heart of today’s Scripture lesson.

**Who Do People Say that I Am?**

One day Jesus and the disciples were traveling in the region of Caesarea Philippi in northern Galilee. They had already spent years together in public ministry. The Twelve had witnessed the Lord’s teaching, preaching, healing, and miracles. In the midst of their journey, Jesus suddenly asked them, “*Who do people say the Son of Man is?*”

The disciples began recounting all the different rumors they had heard about Jesus. “*Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.*”

Then Jesus challenged them with the question, “*But what about YOU? Who do you say I am?*”

In the pregnant silence that followed, Simon finally gave birth to the answer that had grown within him: “*You are the Christ, the son of the living God!*”

Jesus gazed at the big fisherman and responded, “*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it!*”

It was a monumental moment for the disciples. For the first time, Jesus plainly told them that he was the Christ, the Messiah, the long awaited Savior promised to Israel. Centuries of covenants and prophecies had led to this moment. Expectation had finally become reality. God had fulfilled his promise to send the Savior of his people.

But then a strange thing occurred. Jesus told his friends to tell no one that he was the Christ! Huh?!? They had just been told the greatest news of all time, but they were not supposed to tell anyone? Why would the Lord possibly want this to be a secret?

Jesus knew that the Jewish people had all sorts of expectations for who and what the Messiah would be. If the title of Christ was a box, then the religious people had already filled it full of meaning. They had predetermined exactly who the Savior would be—they had their human preconceptions so don’t confuse them with God’s facts!

Jesus began the conversation with the question “*Who do people say the Son of Man is?*” Well, popular opinion expected the Messiah to be a conquering king, a political leader, and a religious reformer. He would restore Israel’s glory from the time of King David and Solomon. Jerusalem would become the center of the world, and all would bow before the Jewish Messiah.

They couldn’t have been more wrong.

### **The Christ of the Cross**

Jesus was the Christ, but he was like no Christ that the people had ever expected. He would fulfill all of the prophetic promises but in a way no one had foreseen. The Lord would triumphantly enter Jerusalem—riding on a donkey. Jesus would wear a crown—of thorns. And he would be enthroned—upon a cross.

Immediately after Peter’s confession, Matthew’s Gospel declares: “*From that moment on, Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.*”

Note the linkage here—the moment that the disciples understood who Jesus was, he immediately began preparing them for his death. This was a critical turning point in the disciple’s journey. From this time on, the shadow of the **cross** would loom over Jesus’ life and ministry.

The disciples were absolutely appalled at Christ’s words. Obviously Jesus was ill-informed about the true nature of the Messiah. Plus they had promised to follow Jesus wherever he went; and the disciples wanted absolutely nothing to do with a cross.

So their leader, Simon Peter, took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. “*Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!*”

In one of the harshest reprimands of Scripture, Jesus said to Peter, “*Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.*”

The contrast in the story could not be any starker. Earlier in the story Jesus had given Simon the nickname of “*Peter*” or “*The Rock*,” and he foretold that Peter would become the leader of the Christian church. Just a few minutes later Jesus called Simon “*Satan*” and told Peter to get behind him.

Then to drive the nail home with a hammer, Jesus told all of them: “*If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*” The men discovered that Jesus’ identity also informed their own identity as disciples.

### **Jesus’ Identity**

Two thousand years later Christ continues to challenge the world with the question: “*Who do YOU say that I am?*” People respond with a variety of answers.

### **A Historical Figure**

All agree that Jesus is an important, historical figure. Many sources beyond the New Testament testify to the life, ministry, and death of Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, more

biographical evidence confirms Jesus' life than George Washington's existence! A strong case can be made that Jesus of Nazareth is THE most important figure in history. Even if one rejects the church's claims about his identity and nature, the movement Christ created transformed the world forever.

### **A Moral Example**

People would also agree that Jesus was a great moral example. His life was a pattern of morality and goodness. His teachings about ethics and values continue to shape our culture today. People like to emphasize Jesus' teaching about love and forgiveness. Christ's Golden Rule is the epitome of social interaction. "*Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*" is just as relevant today as it was 20 centuries ago.

### **A Prophet**

Beyond a majority consensus that Jesus was an important historical figure and moral example, some people would agree that Jesus of Nazareth was a prophet of God. Even other world religions such as Islam and Judaism, recognize Jesus as a prophet. They venerate him like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others.

### **The Son of God**

If Jesus asked us today, "*Who do people say that I am?*" we could respond with these different answers, "Some say you are an important, historical figure. Others lift you up as a moral and ethical example. Some even say you are a prophet sent by God."

However, none of these answers is adequate. Even a cursory reading of the Gospels reveals that Jesus made radical claims about his identity and ministry. The Jewish and Roman authorities did not sentence Christ to death because he taught the crowds to love one another. Jesus suffered and died because he dared to declare that he was THE Son of God sent to save the world.

Faced with Jesus' claims, one must choose. EITHER Jesus was the Son of God. OR he was a liar, fraud, or madman. Logically and spiritually, one cannot believe that Jesus was a moral example and a prophet but then reject his claims of messiahship.

The church testifies to the witness of the Gospels. Jesus Christ was the son of God, and in him the fullness of the deity dwelt bodily upon the earth. In *The Apostles' Creed*, we profess:

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only begotten son,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,  
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried;  
on the third day he arose from the dead and ascended into heaven,  
where he sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;  
and from whence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.*

### **Who Do We Say That Jesus Is?**

However, today I am not asking you to write an essay on Jesus of Nazareth's identity. Instead, I invite you to answer the question of "whom" for yourself: Who do YOU say that Jesus is in **your** own life?

During his public ministry, all sorts of people surrounded Jesus. Some vehemently opposed his ministry and ultimately plotted to take his life. Others couldn't have cared less one way or the other about the itinerant minister. The crowds came because they were curious and hoped to see a healing, miracle, or exorcism. A minority followed him for days and weeks at a time. The inner core of disciples accompanied Jesus the entire three years of his public ministry.

Yet even the apostles were taken aback after Simon Peter proclaimed that Jesus was the Christ, the son of the living God. Not only did Jesus start talking about his own crucifixion and death, but he also began teaching about radical discipleship. He told his friends: *"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it."* (Matthew 16: 24-25)

The Twelve discovered there is a difference between being **an admirer and a disciple** of Jesus. An admirer can respect someone from afar with no cost or obligation. Disciples, however, are called to commitment and sacrifice. Admirers view Jesus long distance; disciples walk in the Master's footsteps. Admirers wear crosses as jewelry. Disciples take up their cross and follow Jesus wherever he leads.

Periodically, the **Gallop or Barna** organizations release polls on religion in America. Typically, over 75% of Americans identify themselves as "Christians." At the risk of sounding judgmental and self-righteous, I seem to run into the other 25% on a daily basis! Does anyone here REALLY believe that three-quarters of the United States population are professing and practicing Christians?!? I think many of these people do not understand the difference between being an admirer and follower of Jesus.

A church member recounted a conversation she had with some friends. At one point, this family was very active in their local church. However, they became disillusioned with the congregation and slowly quit attending. They are now practicing agnostics who show up at Christmas and Easter. The husband/father said, "I'm not sure what I believe, but I finally decided that it doesn't HURT to believe in God just in case." This token of faith is like a premium on fire insurance.

In C. S. Lewis' classic novel, **The Screwtape Letters**, an elder demon instructs an apprentice imp on the fine art of temptation. In one memorable chapter, Screwtape writes: *"A little religion is better for us than no religion at all."* Like a vaccine, a small amount of religion can inoculate the subject from the real thing!

Who do YOU say that Jesus is? Historical figure? Moral example? Prophet? The son of God? There is no middle ground. Jesus claimed that he is the Christ, God's only Son, who came into the world to save sinners. He came to save you and me.

Maybe today you know that Jesus is THE Savior and Lord. But do you know Jesus as MY Savior and Lord? This morning you can enter into a personal relationship with the living Lord.

The question continues to ring in our ears: Who are you? Or to phrase the question in a more critical way: Whose are you?

### Conclusion

The Touch of the Master's Hand
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'Twas battered and scarred, and the auctioneer  
Thought it scarcely worth his while  
To waste much time on the old violin,  
But held it up with a smile.

"What am I bidden, good folks," he cried,  
"Who'll start the bidding for me?"

"A dollar, a dollar. Then two! Only two?  
Two dollars, and who'll make it three?"

"Three dollars, once; three dollars, twice;  
Going for three..." But no,  
From the room, far back, a gray-haired man  
Came forward and picked up the bow;  
Then wiping the dust from the old violin,  
And tightening the loosened strings,  
He played a melody pure and sweet,  
As a caroling angel sings.

The music ceased, and the auctioneer,  
With a voice that was quiet and low,  
Said: "What am I bid for the old violin?"  
And he held it up with the bow.

"A thousand dollars, and who'll make it two?  
Two thousand! And who'll make it three?  
Three thousand, once; three thousand, twice,  
And going and gone," said he.

The people cheered, but some of them cried,  
"We do not quite understand.  
What changed its worth?" Swift came the reply:  
"The touch of the Master's hand."  
And many a man with life out of tune,  
And battered and scarred with sin,  
Is auctioned cheap to the thoughtless crowd  
Much like the old violin.

A "mess of pottage," a glass of wine,  
A game -- and he travels on.  
He is "going" once, and "going" twice,

He's "going" and almost "gone."  
But the Master comes, and the foolish crowd  
Never can quite understand  
The worth of a soul and the change that is wrought  
By the touch of the Master's hand.

-- [Myra Brooks Welch](#)