

SCRIPTURE: Mark 8:27-29

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

SERMON: "Of Questions and Answers" The Rev. Brent Damrow

I remember it as a Peanuts cartoon, even though my google searches over the last few days have come up completely empty as if that cartoon ever existed. But here's what I remember. There was one of the young girls in the Peanuts cartoon sitting at a desk. And around her, all of her classmates are furiously writing in exam booklets, seemingly answering some question that the teacher has asked. I remember that girl having her pencil poised at her lips, her eyes cast upward as she faced what must have been a really tough exam question. And in the next square was this caption: "Dear Teacher, while I really appreciate the question that you have asked, what I'd really rather talk about is ..." And then she proceeds to answer her own question.

I think the reason that cartoon came to my mind is that it's got to be what was on the disciples' minds after he asked them this question there in Caesarea Philippi, of all places. This question of Jesus is a daunting one. It is narrow. It is focused. It leaves no wriggle room. Just ask Peter. Our deacon did a great job reading this passage. The gospel of Mark always wants us to move quickly forward. But here's what I imagine. As they are walking around in this city, a city by the way that was known for its great temple built into the bluffs, a place where little grottoes had been carved out, a place where people came to put idols of the gods they worshipped, there for all to see. It was a place of many different statues, and it was a place where the water that would become the Jordan River found its heading. And so, I can imagine in the midst of all of this, that when Jesus asked that first question, "Who do others say that I am," the disciples perked up, because they had talked to people, they had heard people. They were comfortable saying what other people thought.

And then Jesus gets to the heart of the matter. But wait, who do you, Cathy, say that I am? Judy, what about you? Hey Brian, in the middle of worship would you stand up and answer this question, who would you say that Jesus is? No? Jon, maybe you? Cris, I don't know. (Cris says "the Messiah.") Well, Cris, you are echoing Peter, which is absolutely amazing. And I've got to imagine it took Peter a while. I would imagine that there was some uncomfortable silence, where all the other eleven disciples were just content to let it go. And we know from the gospels that Peter always is the one who screws up enough courage to at least try to answer the question, even if he doesn't always get it right. But this time, Cris, you're absolutely right. Peter gets it absolutely right. As an aside, I have taught many new member classes here, and when we get to that idea of what does it mean that Jesus is the Messiah, well, that's a whole other question, right?

I think one of our challenges, as the kids are over there under the tent having Sunday school class, and today they're focusing on this question of who Jesus is. When we had a Sunday school retreat when I first got here, and got all the teachers together to ask them from among 30 things,

what's the most important thing we could do in Sunday school, they had to put those 30 things, all of which were good, in a ranked order. There could be no ties. The number one thing they came up with is what Henri Nouwen calls the most important question of our lives. The number one thing they came up with is teaching our children who Jesus is and why he matters. We're giving our kids the gift today of learning who Jesus is and why he matters through the stories of the Bible. Through teachers who are dedicated to telling them what they think. Through CDs that will play music that will help them hear the stories. They will be absorbing these stories through the voices of others. And yet it is all to prepare them to answer this question that Jesus asks. Who do you say that Jesus is? Not what your favorite theologian says, not what your favorite Bible passage says, not even what your favorite hymn says. What do *you* say?

It's a question that I think vexes so many of us, because we are so afraid of getting that wrong. We are so afraid of uttering some heresy, or saying something that gets it wrong. We don't have it all figured out. But what we need to remember is that this question that Jesus asked in this place called Caesarea Philippi, it had a location in his ministry, too. This question was not a final exam by any means. If you look in Mark's gospel, this question literally comes at the halfway point of the gospel. It literally comes at the turning point of the whole thing. Jesus has been teaching and healing. Jesus has been praying and leading. Jesus has been multiplying food. Jesus has been doing all sorts of amazing things. And here at the centerpiece of Mark's gospel comes this question. But who do *you* say that I am? Who do you say that I am? It is a critically important question.

Does anybody know what happens right after this story in the gospels? It has to do with a mountain. It has to do with glowing white. (Answers from congregation.) Yes, the Transfiguration! So Jesus asked this question that Peter stammers an answer to, and then Jesus takes the disciples up to the mountaintop where God says "This is my beloved. Listen to him." It becomes crystal clear who he is.

This week I was so thankful for one of my spiritual mentors. It had been a long time since I had read him, and I don't know why. But I was reading Henri Nouwen, one of my heroes. And I wasn't just reading him, I was listening to him. I found a recording of Henri talking about his own spiritual journey. He says that this question that Jesus asks is the question of our human lives. It is our vocation and calling. But I'm thankful because Henri Nouwen was for me kind of like that young girl in the Peanuts cartoon, because Henri took Jesus' question and put it in a way that I really want to talk about.

He says this: What does it mean for you and me, here and now, to live our lives in the spirit of Jesus Christ? We answer this question of who Jesus is by living each and every moment in the spirit of Jesus Christ, here and now. Answering the question by living. Living not just the answers of another, although we hope they give us the courage to set out at all. But also by what we have come to discover through our own lives.

Our Sunday school is going to give our kids a miracle of a gift. They're going to bathe them in stories and tradition and joy and fun. And then at some point it will be up to each of them to claim this faith as their own. When I was in college, my chaplain once said to me, "Brent, get out of here." I'd noticed that no one else came to church in college, and here I was at a formerly

Baptist school in Virginia. And it was me and ten other kids in a chapel that could seat hundreds. And he said, “Brent, here’s my guess, that you are here because you think you’re supposed to be. You are here because your parents gave you the gift of this faith. If that’s true, go. Find it for yourself, and then come back.” There is no question I would not be here today if I had not taken his advice.

And so we give our children a gift today. But we also have to give them the space to live into it, to be able to answer for themselves who is this Jesus and why does he matter. For when they came down from that mountain, Jesus and those disciples went around and about the work of living into all that God promises in the flourishing life.

I’m going to tell you what I did this week. I spent my time on my walks, and in my quiet moments, on the golf course, and in other places, trying to recall who do I think this Jesus is. But not just that. Where do I see the spirit of Jesus? And so, if you give me just a few moments, I want to share some of the stories from this book, the Bible.

The first lesson I came up with is that the Spirit knows it’s not all about us. Because when I look at the spirit of Jesus, I see the Spirit at work first through a fragile, vulnerable baby, impoverished and refugeeed, privileged only by love of stranger and by an amazing, pondering mom. Totally dependent. And yet in that same person I see his strength, willing to stand in silence before the powers of the world.

I see the spirit of a young man delighting in conversations about faith in the Temple, seeing this place as his natural home. And yet also in Jesus, I see the spirit of one who never owned a home himself, so that he could simply go and experience the joy of hospitality in someone else’s home.

I see the Spirit at work in one who is willing to work into all hours of the night to heal anyone and everyone who came to him. And also a Spirit who drove Jesus out at night to pray, to recover and to rest. I see the Spirit filling him with such amazing gifts to salve and heal, and yet the same Spirit making those gifts animate, almost always in the gospels, when Jesus is filled with compassion.

I see one who is laser focused on this day. Today is enough, Jesus says. And yet also rooted in a long arc of goodness. I see the Spirit in his teaching which always offers consolation and hope. But if you read the gospels, it also simultaneously offers the kind of challenge and unbelievable calling to live into a life that really matters.

I see the spirit of one who tenderly allows kids to come to him. And also who drives us out of our holy places with whips and overturns tables when we lose our way. I see the Spirit encouraging him to be so faithful to his calling that he is willing to go even where there will be hurt and pain, humiliation and death. And yet I see that same Spirit nurturing a profound love of life that Jesus has. Remember, he wanted a wedding to be so good that he brought wine. A hundred and thirty two gallons of wine. That’s the kind of good life that Jesus is talking about.

He shared meals with so many, with the outcast and with the privileged. With those who are planning to have a meal and those who forgot about it. He gave them so much food that they went away with round bellies. And he also allowed himself to be fed.

I see humble strength and challenging compassion. I hear one who says pick up your cross and follow me. And yet he says it because he will go with us all the way. Jesus doesn't say come and experience this alone. He says I myself will go to you, so that you will never be alone.

Here's what I see. In Jesus, I always see both the question and the answer, and the next question and the next answer. I see a both/and always keeping us from following any single path, but instead keeping us open to all the paths and fullness of life.

I see one capable of giving and receiving. I see the fullness of humanity and divinity too. I see the impossible possibility, and both the ultimate question and the final answer. I think that Jesus is both the realization of everything that is, and yet the launching pad for so much more.

I often quote Christian Wiman. I love him. He's a poet. And one of the things he says that so strikes me is he says: "At the end of all I know, there I find God." But he's a poet, so he doesn't mean that happens just once. It means we go to the end of all we know, and then we meet God, and we find new truths that we never even dreamed were possible. And then if we're bold enough, like those disciples, we keep on going with Jesus until we come to the end of all we know again. And then we find him again.

I listened to a podcast the other day with Robin DiAngelo and Resmaa Menakem along with Krista Tibbetts, talking about race. The thing that was profound about it was that Robin DiAngelo, who is a white woman who has written the book "White Fragility." She says that she could never claim to be an anti-racist because part of that inbred system of racism is in her, and she can't ever fully get rid of it. But here, she says, is what she can do. In every moment, she has a new chance to do the right thing. And then maybe in that moment, someone will see her and say "Look at what she's found. Look at what she's doing." Never an "already there" but always a "becoming." Remember, Jesus turned to his disciples, and how did he say that the world would know that they follow him? By their love. By their love. By what they did and how they lived.

Now Peter in this passage reminds us of an important truth. There will be times when we need to find words to express our faith. And we need to remember Peter, the one who gives the right answer here, is the one who later when Jesus was arrested goes silent and becomes ashamed. He wasn't ready to answer that question at that moment. But then after the resurrection, it would be Peter who would answer the question of who Jesus is and why he mattered, and the church exploded. Not in numbers (but that, too), but in depth and love.

One last thing from the readings that I want to share with you. When Jesus was confronted with the most holy of holies, with the people who had spent their life dedicated to faith, he almost always said this: "You don't get it. The tax collectors, the prostitutes, the outcasts, they believe. You don't get it." Notice he never said the ex-prostitutes. He never said the former tax collectors. Because what Jesus meant by believing was that they had found goodness in his life, and they

were living every moment just to be like Christ, whether they got it right or not. They were doing what Jesus asks us to do.

Here's what I want you to do on this Rally Day. I want you to be like them, the Sunday school kids over there. I want you to be those kids. And here's why. There was an adult Bible study a couple years ago where one of the participants wrote a note in her evaluation. She said this. "I want to thank you, because for the first time in my life I feel like I really met Jesus. I feel like I really know Jesus. I feel that I'm really following him." May that be the spirit of this day, and every day. Amen.