

“Who do you say that I am?”

One of the unique qualities of Jesus, and of anyone who would be his follower, is that we allow ourselves to be defined by others.

“Who do you say that I am?”

I don’t imagine that too many of us are used to asking this question. It goes against our human inclination to do so. We’re far more used to answering for ourselves. It’s what our mothers taught us to do from a very young age, and for good reason.

“Did you break that window?”

“No, it wasn’t me.”

“Don’t lie to me. Tell me the truth about yourself.”

Over the years, though, it seems that maybe we’ve perverted this good practice of confessing who we are. For I’ve noticed that when we do speak of ourselves it doesn’t tend to be in confessional booths with just a priest or pastor or one good, trusted friend listening in. We’re not inclined to bear our souls, let alone our sins, to one another. But put me in a crowded room, set me up some place where people are ready to be impressed, tell me there’s an opportunity to be given credit for something, and I’ll tell you all about myself. It’s the desire to be known, but we’ve perverted it some, making it so that the only way we know how to talk about ourselves anymore is by showing off, by trying to one-up the person next to us.

Sadly, we see this desire running out-of-control among our political leaders today. When they threaten to release bombs, to take whole countries to war, when they refuse to take responsibility for their words and the ways they’ve used their position to exploit the already disadvantaged and marginalized in our world, when they show a disregard for understanding and unity.

This can happen in churches as well, and it’s especially dangerous when it does because we don’t often recognize it at first, that generosity and serving others can be just another form of self-recognition. Jesus had such a strong distaste for showcasing that he said it would be better to have a millstone tied around your neck and to be thrown into the

deep end of the sea than to pretend you're great when you're not even humble. It begs the question: how do we guard ourselves against our own pride?

In the coming month, all of our ministry groups and church committees will start to meet again—many of us have been on vacations and away from one another all summer—and we will begin to make decisions about how to spend our time and money. Who's going to teach the children? Who's going to feed the hungry? Who's going to patch the holes in the wall when they need patching? Who's going to help visit the sick and elderly when they can't get out? Lots of things to think about, and I would like to suggest that when it comes time to decide, we the church ask must ourselves: In making this decision, who are we giving preference to? And if the decision is giving preference only to the strong and able, let us abandon it to the deep end of the sea.

Still, another way to guard ourselves against our own pride may simply be to ask the question: Who do you say that I am? We might be surprised to hear what people would have to say, and it might cause us to think twice.

When Jesus wanted an answer to this question, he first asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" The *Son of Man* was a title that some had begun to attribute to Jesus because of his miracles and his particular compassion for the lost and forsaken of society. So, what Jesus is asking essentially is, "Who do people say that I am?" Now I don't know about you, but I find it's easy to say what other people are saying, and this is what the disciples do.

"Man, you should hear what they're saying about you out there!"

"And what are they saying?"

"Well, you know, that you're John the Baptist or Elijah or Jeremiah. Basically, that you're just like all the other guys. Nothing new. Mostly talk."

"Yes, but who do *you* say that I am?"

Ah, now we're getting down to business; not to give everyone else's answer but to have to answer for ourselves; to tell the truth about Jesus.

Who do you say that I am?

As Christians, we have a rather speckled and contentious history with this question. Spain 1492. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella send Christopher Columbus sailing in search of new lands. They send him with a rather heavy wallet and with an edict, which is

to be read to any indigenous natives he encounters along his way. As it goes, the first people he meets are Caribbean. The edict reads:

“I certify to you that with the help of God, we shall forcibly enter into your country and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can, and shall subject you to the yoke and obedience of the Church; and shall, for your good, take away all your goods, and do harm and damage to [those] who do not obey but refuse to receive their lord, our Savior, Jesus Christ.”¹

This is one way to answer the question, who do you say Jesus is, is to beat upon and eliminate those who don't agree with your answer. Jesus the Conqueror!

A less violent but no less damaging answer to this same question is to dismiss those who don't agree with your answer as illegitimate. Germany 1543. Martin Luther, the passionate catholic monk who railed against his fellow priests for abusing the poor and charging people to receive the forgiveness of sins—we are saved by grace and grace alone, he proclaimed—publishes the following teaching regarding Jews:

“[That we ought to] set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them. This is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians, and do not condone or knowingly tolerate [their] public lying, cursing, and [disbelief] of his Son Jesus and of his Christians.”²

It ought to be said that Luther wasn't anti-Semitic. We don't know him to have ever called for a holocaust of the Jews. Nonetheless, Luther was anti-Jewish. He could not stand the thought that his religion might not be the only right one, that God would love a thousand others beside me. Some people are like this. They are known more for what they reject than for what they embrace. If they can't have the whole pie, then no one can.

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On the other hand, there are times throughout history when we have seemingly divided Jesus up, when we've agreed to disagree and to go our separate ways. Augusta, Georgia 1834. A group of southern clergy claimed that slavery was biblical, that the God of the Old Testament sanctioned it for the Hebrews in Egypt, and that though slavery was a

¹ Tzvetan, Todorov, (1992). *The Conquest of America*; New York: Harper Perennial, p. 147.

² From *On the Jews and Their Lies*.

burden *to the white man*, it was necessary for maintaining a robust economy still and that any effort to abolish it would lead to revolution. For ten-years this same argument held up until, in 1844, the Methodists said no more and excommunicated a southern bishop who held slaves. The result was a split that led to the formation of a new religious denomination: The Southern Baptists.³ Of course, we know that the decision to go their separate ways wouldn't last for long. 15 years later the two groups would meet again, now on the battlefields of the Civil War. In the words of Abraham Lincoln, each side believing they were fighting to be on God's side.

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A more practical answer to the question may be to wrap Jesus in a flag and take him to a voting booth. Virginia 1979. Jerry Falwell, a prominent Baptist pastor, launches the Moral Majority, a political action group whose purpose, according to Falwell, was to "influence all viable presidential candidates on issues important to the church. [To stand against gay rights, any and all abortions, and to deny equal rights to women.] We want answer. We want appointments to government. We have together, with the Protestants and Catholics, enough votes to run the country,"⁴ claimed Falwell.

Who do you say that I am? Jesus the Politician? Jesus the Conqueror? Jesus the Slaveholder, or Jesus the Emancipator? Or someone else altogether? Like I said, we have a rather speckled and contentious history with this question.

Now some will say, well that's not my history. I'm not racist. I have no prejudices. That may be the history of those who have gone before me, but I'm better than that. But I tell you, the day is coming, and indeed is already here, when we who say we follow Jesus are going to be asked to answer for him. And if we are not careful, history will repeat itself. But I have hope that we can write a better ending.

As you may know, last weekend I wasn't here. I was away on retreat at Camp Aldersgate with a group of middle school students and Laurie Ezovski and Tasha Marietti. I love spending time with your children. Sleeping on a bottom bunk underneath them, not so

³ Fitzgerald, Frances, (2017). *The Evangelicals. The Struggle to Shape America*; New York: Simon & Schuster, p. 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

much, but riding a zip line through the woods with them, playing football in the lake, listening to their honest questions, being in prayer and praise with them...all this I love.

On our last morning there we gathered outside for worship, and I asked everyone to take off their socks and shoes while we read the story about Jesus washing his disciples' feet at dinner one night. Did you ever look at your feet? I mean, *really* look at them? Most of us probably go through the day with our feet covered. We don't look at them until the day is over, until our feet are tired and we want someone to massage them for us, or until we step on something sharp and we realize we need new sneakers. I have ugly feet. The skin is rough and dry, not all the nails are growing in the same direction. They're ugly, but they're not dirty. If you were alive in Jesus's day, though, and you looked at your feet, all you'd probably see was dirt. People didn't have Nikes and Reeboks. They had sandals and probably only one pair. By the end of the day, when you sat down to dinner, your feet were caked with the day, and this is what Jesus sees. That the disciples have been around, and maybe some of them have been in places doing things they shouldn't have been, showing up on the wrong side of love. And Jesus tells them, "Give me your feet. Let me wash them."

But when Jesus comes to Peter, Peter tells him, "No Jesus, not just my feet, but my hands and head, too. If you're going to wash me, wash all of me."

"You don't need to be washed all over," Jesus tells him. "Just your feet."

When I asked the group last Sunday what they thought Jesus was up to in washing only the disciples' feet, no one knew for sure. I don't know for sure. But one person did say, "Maybe it means there are some parts of us that are really, really gross, but still Jesus would rather clean us up than to throw us away."

Who do you say that Jesus is?

Amen.