

## Who Is Jesus?

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James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

I want to ask you to think for a minute about what's in your purse or wallet. No, not your money. I mean all the things you carry around with you to establish your identity: a driver's license, your bank card, your library card, your Medicare card, all the little plastic fobs on your key chain that identify you as a frequent customer of a certain store or a member of the gym. We have to prove who we are, so each of us carries around a whole set of things that identify us as our unique selves. Nametags, drivers' licenses, passports, DNA samples, bumper stickers, and tattoos serve to establish our uniqueness among the 6.783 billion people with whom we share this planet.

Jesus didn't, as far as we know, have any tattoos, and he certainly didn't have a driver's license, but the things he did and said apparently left people wondering like the bystanders in the old Lone Ranger movies, "Who *is* that masked man?" Even Jesus had to establish his identity.

What I learned about identity from growing up in the South is that who you are is based on two things: where you come from and who your people are. That realization was crystallized for me by a story I heard shortly after arriving in Richmond, VA for my first real job. A Richmond matron of mature years was informed that a certain young woman had become engaged to be married. Naturally she wanted to know who the prospective bride's intended was—where is he from and who are his people, in other words. "He's not from Richmond; he's from Staunton," was the reply. The lady considered this for a moment, then said with gracious diplomacy, "Well . . . I suppose there must be some nice people in Staunton."

But in Jesus' case, even knowing where he's from and who his people are doesn't help. In fact, Mark tells us that one time when Jesus went back to his hometown and was teaching in the synagogue, the very people who knew precisely where he was from and who his people were got very upset: "You're Joseph and Mary's boy from right here in Nazareth. Where do you get off interpreting the scriptures to us?" And they were prepared to throw him off a cliff then and there.

Each of the gospels is deeply concerned with establishing Jesus' identity as Messiah, Christ, God's Anointed One. Mark emphasizes that Jesus wanted his true identity kept secret and he keeps telling the disciples to keep quiet about it. But here in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark, he brings the question of his identity out in the open: Who do people say that I am?

The disciples report that based on the latest polling data from the local area, Jesus is thought to be the reincarnation of a) Elijah, b) John the Baptizer or c) one of the other prophets.

That was just the warm-up question, though. Jesus then asks, "But what about you? Who do you say that I am?"

Of course, that's the same question he asks us: "Who do you say that I am?"

The thing is, most of the time when we're asked about who Jesus is, we stick with that safe first question. We answer who *other people* say he is. "Well, Marcus Borg says this" or "Dominic Crossan says that." It's easy to cling to the certainty of published scholarly opinion or to get lost in words about God rather than confronting the Word of God. I like the way Tom Woodward sums up this safe, decorous approach to faith: "Often it seems like we are dating God -- always on our best behavior, never angry or indiscreet, and ever attentive and respectful; but at some time we need to quit dating God and begin working on a serious relationship."<sup>1</sup>

The opportunity for that serious relationship opens up when Jesus asks that other question, "But who do you say that I am?" Now the ground shifts. Now it's not enough to quote Borg or Crossan. Because that

question confronts us, in the most personal way possible, with our fears and our inadequacy. It brings us to the brink of mystery--not to certainty, but uncertainty. The Christ stands before us and asks us to respond from what is deepest and most sacred and most hidden within us.

No wonder we get so nervous about that question. I may be fine with teaching Sunday school or putting a Jesus bumper sticker on the car and maybe wearing a little gold cross on a chain around my neck, but when Jesus looks me in the eye and starts to talk about sacrifice and cross-bearing, I start to sweat. This is about relationship and commitment and putting my life on the line.

Karl Heim, in *Christian Faith and Natural Science*, says that our universe is one in which the Holy resides in a fourth or fifth dimension, inaccessible to humans living in a world our senses limit to three dimensions. The Holy is just as real as any of the objects, sights, sounds, or persons in our three-dimensional universe, and it is fully present at all times, but only occasionally are we able to experience that dimension.

Mark's gospel shows us some of that. It begins and ends with dramatic scenes that involve the Greek word *schizomeno*—splitting--with the heavens at Jesus' baptism and the veil of the Temple at his death splitting in two, overcoming the separation between the holy and the profane. At those moments there was nothing separating us from the full and complete presence of the Holy.

We also get glimpses of the Holy entering our world of space and time in Mark's accounts of encounters between Jesus and other people: the Syrophenician woman, the Gerasene demoniac, or the Samaritan woman at the well. When these people come face to face with Jesus, they meet the Holy, fully present in Jesus. These stories offer us glimpses of the Holy and the possibility of transformation.

That question, "Who do you say that I am?" confronts us with the impossible, awe-full possibility of our own transformation. Mark says that right after Jesus asks the disciples that, he terrifies them by talking about death and crosses. But notice, Jesus didn't say, "Take up my cross." He said that anybody who wants to come after him must pick up his or her cross, and follow. Picking up *your* cross is a path to transformative possibility in your life, the encounter with the Holy in the everyday. I believe that one thing Jesus is telling us is to accept the difficult circumstances of our own lives—illness, pain, disability, unemployment, aging parents, the whole nine yards—and carry on with them. And somehow in that process of *bearing with*, of carrying the cross, or helping somebody else carry a cross that gets too heavy, the Holy, the real, transformative stuff rips into our ordinary daily existence. And when that happens, we find out who Jesus really is, and who we really are.

There's an example in *Traveling Mercies*, the book that the 8<sup>th</sup> Day Group is reading now. The writer, Anne Lamott, is unusually candid in describing a dark and difficult period of her life, when her despair and desperation were increased rather than diminished by drugs, alcohol, and a series of disastrous relationships. In an especially dark moment, when she is alone, recovering from an abortion, she describes her awareness of another presence in the darkness.

The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there—of course, there wasn't but after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. . . . I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with patience and love.<sup>ii</sup>

The invitation to pick up a cross often makes us assume that we have to start by doing a series of heroic, saintly things for somebody else--and who ever feels good enough to do that first thing in the morning? But accepting the truth of your life, looking into your deepest self without flinching, is the first cross to pick up. Anne Lamott finally surrendered her conviction of her own worthlessness and her disappointment at not living up to her great fantasies about who she was supposed to be. Her unique encounter with the persistent presence of the Holy showed her who she really was, so that she willingly took up the transforming cross of discipleship.

When Jesus says, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” it makes us squirm. It’s a question that’s also a challenge to look at who you really are and what your life is about. It’s a question that is also an invitation, an invitation to stop “dating God” and enter into a committed relationship.

If you accept the challenge of his question, Who am I?, you’ll never have to wonder who you are. We who take up the challenge of that question are beloved children of God, servants and seekers, connected to one another in our journey into the heart of God.

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<sup>i</sup> I acknowledge a debt to Thomas B. Woodward’s reflection, “Who Do You Say That I Am,” *Witness Magazine*, September 13, 2006.

<sup>ii</sup> New York: Pantheon Books, 1999, 49-50.