

It has been close to ten years now since this story of Jesus asking his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” landed on me as the most important of all the gospel stories in the forming of my faith as a Christian. More than anything else, it shaped why I decided to attend seminary in Chicago. I always said if I ever was asked to deliver a sermon, assuming it would only happen once, it would be on this text. Yet, when I was finally asked for a sermon, I chose to respond to whatever text came up that week in the lectionary, partly because my past attempts to express what this text speaks so deeply to my heart sounded hollow in comparison, as if words themselves were wholly insufficient.

But another reason I chose to follow the lectionary for all these Sundays is that it forced me to craft my sermons as if they were responses to a question, a challenge if you will. “You call yourself a Christian? Fine. Well what about this?” The Virgin Birth? The Resurrection? The notion that God demands suffering and that someone else’s counts for my own? These are ideas that I find really hard to swallow intellectually. Sometimes, even morally. It is as if Jesus was asking me, “Alright. You have your ideas about me. How about this? Who do you say that I am now?”

Today’s text is not without such a challenge for me. You see, my go-to version of this story is from the gospel attributed to Mark. I considered substituting it, but I didn’t. Mark depicts the

disciples as thick-headed, bumbling fools. Throughout the book, Jesus is constantly slapping his forehead because they never seem to get what he is talking about. I find them much easier to identify with. And maybe, if Jesus stuck with them, he will stick with me, too, as I struggle to hear his voice. Mark's Simon Peter, and Luke's too by the way, blurts out, "You are the Christ." And Jesus immediately, and in no uncertain terms, orders them not to tell anyone, as if the answer was wrong, or it was right, but Peter didn't have a clue why and had no right to say so.

Jesus' abrupt, unequivocal command to tell no one he is the Messiah is to my mind one of the greatest puzzles in the written text of any religious tradition, particularly because Christianity has been doing it constantly for 2000 years! Of all the snippets of scripture the biblical literalists take literally, the vilification of Jews, the subjugation of women, the condemnation of homosexuality, I so wish they hadn't overlooked this one. "Tell no one I am the Messiah." Reading Mark, you wouldn't think a thunderclap was God bowling. You'd think it was Jesus clapping his hand to his forehead, shaking his head, and said for the umpteenth time, "They still don't get it."

Today's gospel reading attributed to Matthew, on the other hand, in response to Peter's so-called confession, inserts the equivalent of a game show host awarding the day's winner with "a

brand new car!” At least, that is the way it is traditionally read. For most Catholics, Matthew’s Jesus is establishing Peter as the first of a long line of Popes, some of whom were not all that nice. Protestants, in their protest of Catholicism, parse the difference between petros, a little rock named Peter, and petra, a big rock, big enough to build a church on. It isn’t Peter, but Peter’s statement, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” that our Protestant church is built on self-validating a no less questionable claim to divine authority, binding these to slavery and poverty, loosing those to lives of liberty, and pursuits of happiness.

So, this is the challenge for me, how to resolve the difference between the account in both Mark and Luke which forbids laying claim to messianic authority, and Matthew’s which has been read from virtually the beginning of Christianity as explicitly bestowing it. It would be easy to simply say, “Well, Jesus didn’t actually say this. The author just pulled it out of his, uh, imagination.” But after the scripture readings every Sunday, we say, “This is the word of God.” Is it, or isn’t it? Is it possible God spoke and we misunderstood? Is there another way to read this text? I happen to believe that if Christianity is to have any moral authority in this morally relativistic world, if Christianity is to have any future at all, there had better be one. Let’s turn to the text.

Originally named Pnias, Caesarea Philippi was built by Alexander the Great's empire around a sacred spring dedicated to the Greek God, Pan. The city was expanded and renamed by Philip the Tetrarch, son of Herod the Great, to both honor Caesar Augustus and to claim some of that honor himself. It is interesting that this story is set in a place dedicated to the proposition that one can claim another's glory simply by taking his name.

Jesus asks two questions of his disciples. In the first in which he asks who the people say he is, he refers to himself by that odd title, "the Son of Man." Notice that Jesus frames his question in the third person, the people, the son, and the disciples answer in kind with the proper names of three people who are dead. There is no direct reference to either the asker of the question, or to the ones of whom it is asked. Objectivity protects one from accountability. And the question you ask shapes the kind of answer you get in response. This answer is decidedly wacky. If I asked you who you thought I was and you said, "Brad Pitt," I would suggest you visit the eye doctor.

Jesus' second question takes a radical, history-changing departure, and it is precisely that departure that makes this story so enormously important to me. You could say it is the rock on which my faith is built. "Who do You (second person) say that I (first person) am?" Notice the third person is nowhere present in

this question. Jesus has removed the safety of objectivity. This time, the fisherman, Simon Peter, is working without a net.

Jesus is not asking the disciples to answer his own question, “Who am I?,” as if he didn’t know, or had forgotten. He is, perhaps, the only person in all of written human history who knew exactly who he was. Count the incredible number of times Jesus says, “It is I.” “I am he.” “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” He says it over 25 times in the gospel of John alone. John 8:58 even records Jesus saying, “before Abraham was, I am,” echoing the words God said to Moses out of the burning bush, “I am that I am.” Who “I am” is not Jesus’ question. The question was “Who do YOU say I am?”

In all three versions of this story, Simon Peter is the one who steps up and blurts out, “You are the Messiah” Or “the Christ” as in Mark and Luke. The two words can be substituted for each other. They both translate as “the Anointed One.” Peter takes the bait (another fishing reference!) and answers appropriately in the second person, “You are . . .”, but then he slips back into third person or the safety of an objective reference, “. . . the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Or does he? What do we meaning precisely when we use that word, Messiah? I will come back to that question shortly.

Jesus seems to congratulate Simon, “Blessed are you!” but then Jesus calls him “Simon son of Jonah” Most commentators take this reference at face value. Simon’s dad, probably a fisherman, too, was named Jonah. Move on. Nothing to see here. Simon’s dad is named John in the gospel attributed to John, so his dad’s name is John or Jonah, close enough. Move on. Nothing to see here.

But if we look at the beginning of chapter 16, just a few verses before this story is told, we read of the Pharisees testing Jesus by asking for a sign. Jesus answers them, “An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.” Jonah, you will remember, was an Old Testament prophet who was tasked with carrying the message of God’s forgiveness to Nineveh, the empire responsible for the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel. Rather than risk becoming the agent of God’s forgiveness of one of Israel’s greatest enemies, Jonah runs away only to be swallowed by a fish and held there until he agrees to carry the message and eventually does become the agent of Nineveh’s rescue from God’s wrath, much to his chagrin.

There was much talk in 1st century Palestine of a coming Messiah who would lay the Roman empire to waste and restore the kingdom of Israel to its former glory. In the passage

immediately following today's story, Simon rebukes Jesus, "God forbid it, Lord!," for saying he is going to die at the hands of the very government they wished to see him overthrow. In the course of just a few verses, Simon goes from being "Blessed" to being told "Get behind me, Satan!" In his rebuke of Jesus, Simon Peter revealed that when he called Jesus "The Messiah," the title carried a very specific set of expectations, in particular, that Jesus would be the agent of the destruction of Israel's greatest enemy. The significance here for me is not so much that Simon was wrong about Jesus' mission. It is that he said the magic words, "You are . . ." and followed them with who he thought or wanted Jesus to be.

So what was it that Jesus heard when Simon called him the Messiah? It is not what flesh and blood revealed which Jesus suggests Simon shares with his metaphorical daddy, the prophet Jonah. Jesus' Father in heaven reveals something wholly different in that term, "Messiah." What does it mean to be "anointed of God" if not that you carry in your very being from the moment of your birth God's seal of approval to be exactly who you are, forever free of any labels, expectations, or price tags that God did not put there. I think Jesus wanted to hear in Simon Peter's confession, "You are who God made you to be, sent to do what God sent you to do." In other words, and in intimate relationship

with the One who spoke to Moses from the burning bush, “You are that you are.”

Martin Buber was a 20th century German-born Jewish philosopher. He wrote a book in his native German language which he titled Ich und Du, which has been translated into English as I and Thou. The primary proposition of this book is that, once self-awareness arises in a human, two attitudes become possible toward that which is not the self. Buber calls these attitudes “basic words” because although unspoken themselves, they shape the language in which the other is addressed.

He calls the first basic word “I-It” in which the other is objectified either as something the self calls an experience or as a kind of tool put to use for the benefit of the self. The second basic word he calls “I-Thou,” or simply “I-You” in which the other cannot be bound to the self either as an experience or as a useful object enslaved for purposes dictated by the self. When the “I” speaks the basic word, “You,” the other becomes an inexorable subject, a fortress which cannot be breached by the experience of any other. The two are brought into relationship in which truly transformative dialogue becomes not just possible, but necessary, if the two are to continue as two together.

Buber admits the difficulty if not the impossibility of always speaking “You.” There are times when experience and usefulness



are, well, useful. Science, for instance, is impossible without objectifying reality, and observing causes and effects. Education is impossible without recording and organizing experience. But it can go too far. Buber speaks of an It-World in which “leading statesmen and businessmen depend on their way of seeing the human beings with whom they have to deal not as carriers of an inexperienceable You, but rather as centers of services and aspirations that have to be calculated and employed according to their specific capacities.” I wonder if this manner of seeing people only for their usefulness might better be called not seeing (Nazi-ing, hm-m).

I think this It-world of which Buber speaks is not too different from the world the apostle Paul is warning us not to be conformed to in today’s Epistle reading. I wonder if the transformation Paul calls for might not be the product of saying the basic word, “You.” The problem is that in this world people often demand to be seen as objects, objects of worth, objects of beauty, and, frankly, sometimes these objects can be pains in the neck. But Buber speaks of the possibility of “the You that originally could not be an object of experience” the original “I am that I am” to become real, to “confront me bodily, to have to deal with me as I must deal with it — only differently.” This is the You I pray that I speak when I

say the word, “God.” This is the “Messiah” Jesus heard in Simon Peter’s confession even though he had no clue he said it.

Perhaps, the keys of the kingdom are nothing but the possibility of saying either “You” or “It.” Whether Jesus gave them to us or not, we truly hold them in our hand. When we assign labels and categories to the beings with which we share this beautiful world, when we limit others only to how we experience them, when we say God as if He or She exists only to address our needs, we bind with chains that cannot be broken either here or any other place we can imagine. But when we say the basic word, “You,” there are no chains in heaven or on earth that can hold the one to whom it is said.

I have come to love Matthew’s version of this tale. I love how Jesus’ question “Who do you say that I am” yielded, not one, but two times “You” is spoken. Simon Peter’s “You are the Messiah,” and Jesus’ renaming of Peter, “You are petros” literally “a rock.” Do you get the humor of naming a guy who makes his living sitting in a boat, “The Rock?” A rock in a boat is only good as an anchor. No wonder he sinks so fast when he tries to walk on water.

I am grateful that Christianity was so well served by such a firm anchor. How else would such a story come to us from so long ago? But now, where we find ourselves as Christians, so

burdened with the chains we have accumulated over 2000 years that we struggle to stay afloat, perhaps it is time to cut the moorings and turn to face the You who cannot be bound, the “I am” who faces us and responds “And you are, too.”