
WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

MATTHEW 16:13-20

A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL

ON SUNDAY, AUGUST 27, 2023

BY THE REV. DR. LUKE A. POWERY

This is the time of year—first year students—when I’m sure you’re receiving lots of questions and asking lots of questions: What’s your name? Where are you from? What high school did you attend? Do you have siblings? What do you like to do for fun? Why did you choose Duke over UNC-Chapel Hill (that’s an easy one!)? What do you want to major in? Or, where is the Lemur Center? How do I get inside to watch a Duke Men’s basketball game? Who is the coolest professor? How many steps do you have to climb to reach the top of the Chapel tower (I know you were wanting to know that)?

There are lots of questions being raised these days as you learn about Duke and one another. There are even deeper questions. According to Dr. Karin Powell of the Fuller Youth Institute, there are three fundamental questions: Who am I? Where do I fit? What difference can I make?

Questions are wonderful and a sign of curiosity and exploration. In fact, they are a part of the life of faith too. There are questions spread all throughout the Bible, so we don’t need to shy away from asking them. We should love questions and live the questions now. And just in case you thought we were the only ones with questions at the start of a new academic year. Believe it or not, Jesus has his own. “Who do you say that I am?”

At first, he asks the disciples a broader question—who do people say that the Son of Man is? And they responded, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." We do say in Christian theology that Jesus held a three-fold office—prophet, priest and king—so he’s a part of the biblical prophetic tradition. But Jesus is more than a prophet. And Jesus is Jesus, John is John, Elijah is Elijah, Jeremiah is Jeremiah. Harry Styles is Harry Styles. Maybe how Jesus sounded or how he walked or what he wore made them think he was one of these ancient prophets. It’s a reminder that just because people may think or say they know who you are, doesn’t mean they actually know who you are.

They call Jesus all kinds of names. “Jesus, you really look like John. Jesus, you look like my next-door neighbor. Jesus, you really look like Coach K.” Some say this. Some say that. The Lutherans believe this. The Presbyterians believe that. The nondenominational folks say this. Everyone won’t agree on everything; there are different perspectives even about Jesus. That’s important to remember. But what’s intriguing to me is although the prophets named were powerful in their own right and that could be a compliment, these were dead men. Yet they were encountering a living Messiah right before their eyes, and they still thought he was someone dead. Usually, a prophet is someone who comes before and prepares everyone for the big thing. So this surely can’t be Jesus because Jesus is the big thing!

Even in the year 2023, we’re not talking about a dead man but a living God. Jesus is the big thing and different from all those who were mentioned, because he will die but unlike the others, he will rise, just as he said. That means he’s alive today in the power of the Spirit at Duke University and the question he asks is a live one for us. Not who do people say that I am? But who do *you* say that I am? There comes a time when you can’t rely on just what other people say or just follow what you heard growing up or what your Sunday school teacher said or what one of your coaches promoted or answering in such a way because you think it is the right answer but not your heart answer. Today, Jesus is asking you like he did the disciples. Who do you say that I am?

It should be no surprise that when Jesus asks the disciples, only the goody two shoes student Peter answers. No other disciples do. Bravo, Peter! You did it again. He’s right when he says, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus gives him an A+ and he loves it. “Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah.” As one scholar wrote, “Peter has participated in every tutorial offered by Jesus from the beginning of his public ministry”(Audrey West). So no wonder he gets it right. Peter is surely confident at this point but soon Jesus calls him a “stumbling block” and later on he denies that he even knows Jesus. The loudest and the first to speak up all the time in a class discussion is not always the one to follow or emulate. Peter’s answer is right but he’s only one of the 12 disciples.

Some commentators see Peter as a representative of the whole, but I want to hear from the other 11. Who do they think Jesus is? Maybe they aren't as sure as Peter. Maybe they have questions still. The disciples don't always understand everything about Jesus. Perhaps they carry doubts in their hearts or just like going with the crowd. Who do you say that I am? Except from Peter, we only hear crickets.

The silence of the disciples in Matthew is an invitation to us—today's disciples, followers of Jesus. An invitation to gather our thoughts about who Jesus is and answer that question for ourselves. For some, he's a waymaker, a miracle worker, a promise keeper, a light in the darkness. For others, he's a doctor in the hospital room, a lawyer in the court room, a professor in the classroom, a mind regulator, a heart fixer, a wounded healer. Who do *you* say that I am?

After asking that question, and having only Peter answer, Jesus orders them all not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. After asking 'to say' Jesus then says, 'don't say.' Most of the disciples don't say anything because what Jesus wants is for them to do something more than say something. He wants who they say Jesus is to shape how they live. As professor Eric Barreto writes, "the questions of identity are not just a matter of definition but of formation, not just doctrine but discipleship." 'Don't tell anyone but go ahead and show everyone.' Live into the answer to the question.

We answer the question of Jesus by the life we live. We demonstrate who Jesus is to us by speaking through our actions, not mere words. How you live reveals who he is to you. "You thought I wanted you to say something. But I want you to emulate the rest of the 11 disciples and do something. Let your life speak."

Don't just say who he is but show who you say he is. Like the apostle Paul says in today's Romans reading: present your bodies as a living sacrifice. You've got to walk who Jesus is, not just talk it, this year. The question "Who do you say that I am?" is an invitation to discover who Jesus really is to you and then show it.

In that way, you become like Jesus who is God's incarnate Word. For Jesus embodies his words; what he says, he does. His life is the amen to what he proclaims with his lips. Just as our life speaks who Jesus is to us, his life speaks who we are to him. Just as he predicted, he would undergo suffering, be crucified and on the third day be raised. His body was a living sacrifice of love for the world.

I could be out of a job by saying this, but I'll join the poet who wrote, "I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day."

Who do you say that I am? Think of your heart answer right now. Don't say it. Go live it.