

WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?
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The question asked in today's gospel is one of the central questions of Christianity. It is a question that is unique to the Christian faith and is at the heart of our faith.

I want to try something very different with you today in terms of a guided meditation. It is often hard to put ourselves into the ancient world. Many of you have read the Shack. In the Shack the main character McKenzie is transported to the shack where his young daughter had been taken to after she had been kidnapped. McKenzie is very angry with God for in his view allowing this awful murder to occur, but through this encounter with the Trinity in the shack he is healed. God is a large African American Woman and Jesus is carpenter dressed in a flannel shirt and jeans and the Holy Spirit seems to resemble tinkerbelle for lack of a better term. She is a shimmering almost translucent presence that you can see, but just can't quite pin down. For this meditation we are going to focus on Jesus, flannel shirt and all.

So please get comfortable, place your feet on the floor and feel connected to creation. Close your eyes and focus on your breathing for a moment. Say a prayer to invite Jesus to come for a talk.

It is morning at the shack. God has just prepared a wonderful breakfast for all and Jesus and you walk out to the porch after eating. As you sit in a couple of rocking chairs on a beautiful sunny morning you can hear God at the sink, cleaning up. Can you feel a slight breeze, The smell of bacon and coffee is still in the air. Maybe you have a cup of coffee in your hand. It is wonderfully peaceful. Enjoy the sunshine. Enjoy just sitting in the presence of Jesus.

Jesus is looking out over the lake and asks, "Who do people say I am?" You think about what you have heard people say about Jesus and you answer him. What do you say? (Pause)

Then he turns to you. He invites you to gaze into his eyes. Then he asks, "Who do you say I am?" What do you say? What are you feeling as you look into his eyes on that porch in the sun. (Pause)

Jesus looks at you, deep into the center of your being and says, "I love you completely and totally." How does it feel to hear Jesus say this? (Pause)

Who do you say I am?

We all have an answer. You may feel content with your answer or you may feel it is inadequate. Some may have never thought about a personal response and that is ok. Your

answer is neither good, nor bad; right or wrong. Your answer is your answer. However a good spiritual director will take your answer and ask you to examine it in depth. We are always refining our answer. A friend of mine commented on his Facebook page that for us as clergy to preach on this we must answer this ourselves. He also said that if there is not some struggle, some suffering in the answer then we do not have a complete answer.

The answer to this question is what church is all about. The Church has struggled to answer this question for 2000 years. People have argued, fought and yes even died defending what they believe is "the answer" to this ultimate question.

Peter's challenge is that he is looking at Jesus with human eyes as a human person. Even his concept of Messiah is fully human grounded in the history of the nation of Israel. It is fully human because Jesus has not yet been crucified or resurrected. Jesus startles Peter with his Son of Man language. Peter's challenge is our challenge, to look at the person of Jesus who we can understand and see the divine that lies within.

What got me thinking along these lines was an answer on my Facebook when I posted the question of who do people say Jesus is. One answer that I got was a favorite uncle who is still reachable. Now there is no right or wrong answer, but I would like to consider a concern with that statement. The problem I have with this is that this is a very safe, a domesticated Jesus. If I have learned anything over the years, I have learned that one of the most dangerous things to do is to attempt to domesticate Jesus, God and the Holy Spirit. That usually ends badly. This is also what Jesus talks about in the second half of today's gospel. Jesus is not some safe cuddly figure that does not cause us any discomfort. Jesus does not come down and make our lives move on without any bumps along the way.

The other problem is that what we believe have as a church cannot be explained logically. The average person who knows nothing about Christianity would look at the Nicene Creed, which is the orthodox statement about the nature of Christ and say, "You've got to be kidding. People really believe this?" The challenge is that of course none of this makes sense if you approach it from the standpoint of the physical world. None of this makes sense unless we take the time to answer who do you say I am. None of this makes sense unless we take the time to encounter Jesus and enter into a relationship with him.

That we all have to answer the question of who do you say I am, is one the messages that I find are at the heart of the novel *The Shack*. The Trinity appears to McKenzie in a way he can grasp, but is also in a form that challenges him. Many have responded with great disdain for the portrayal of the Trinity in the book. The author is not saying that this is the only view of the Trinity, but rather the image the McKenzie needed in order to be healed. There is no one right answer, at least as long as we are in this life. There is only the answer we have right now, today. Tomorrow, that answer may be different. Our relationship and our answer to the question is never static.

This question is not about who we would like Jesus to be, but who Jesus is and that places us in an uncomfortable position. Part of that discomfort is that everybody will have their own answer. The other part of the discomfort is that we never seem to get a final answer.

In the Shack, Jesus challenges McKenzie to look at his fear his anger, his dark side if you will. That's where the take up your cross part of this passage comes in. There is pain and struggle in this examination, but this is needed for his healing. McKenzie's picking up of his cross was part of his healing. Picking up our cross is part of our healing and part, an integral part of your working on the answer to the question of the day. This will involve struggle and some hard work. What the nature of that cross is also changes and evolves, but that is another sermon.

In the front page article of the newsletter I wrote of why are we here, what is the purpose of church. I am here with you and you are here with me to encounter Jesus. That is the business of our church. We are called to work together as a community so that all can answer the question of who do you say I am.