

“But Who Do You Say I Am?”

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

Sunday, March 1, 2020 ~~ Lent 1

Text: Matthew 16:13-20

As Lent begins Jesus seems like a rather obvious choice as the focal point of a sermon series. Lent is, after all, intended as a time of preparation for us so that we are ready to receive and fully appreciate the gift of new life made possible by the Resurrected Jesus on Easter. The observance of Lent to the extent we do now in the United Church of Christ and other mainline churches is a substantial change from what it was when I was a child. The Presbyterian Church I grew up in outside of Pittsburgh did not observe Lent at all. Holy Week, yes. Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday – yes, definitely. But that was it.

Many of my friends were Catholic and would come to school on Ash Wednesday with big dark smudges on their foreheads. I still remember the first time I noticed one of my girlfriends with the smudge, I asked her if she'd gotten hit in the face with a dirty snowball. This was entirely possible since we always had snow on the ground in February and March and we also had a lot of cinders on the road because that's what was used to provide traction to cars on snow covered roadways. You can imagine that the snow alongside the roadways would become gigantic piles of dirty, dirty snow. Thus my question to my friend. She looked at me like I was crazy, shouted, “No!” and ran away. I was confused

so I asked my mom about it when I got home and my first inkling about the significance of Lent took root. Something special and mysterious was happening when it came to that black smudge on my friend's forehead and it seemed to have something to do with God. How cool was that?

Fast forward to this morning, more decades later than I care to think about. But, here I am, still convinced that there is something uniquely special about Lent. Perhaps it is the hint of the mystical in this observance of ancient rituals like ash crosses. Perhaps it's the encouragement in Lent to deepen one's immersion in meditation and prayer and the scriptures with the promise of an encounter with the divine, however fleeting. But how to do this? How should we proceed if we hope to create here in our church a Lenten ethos, a sacred environment, in which each of us can find our way to new and deeper insights about God? Well, the best way to do this, I think, is to invest our time and energies in getting to know Jesus a little better. Now I am not talking about studying Jesus more deeply in an academic sort of way, although there is an academic discipline within theology that does precisely that. It's called Christology and it is the study of Jesus – his life and teachings and how he became the Christ – the Messiah – the Anointed One. We could do that, of course. And I'm fairly certain some churches will do that this Lent.

But we're doing something different. We are going to try to engage in getting to know Jesus better on a personal level. How can we do that, you're no doubt wondering. Excellent question! We'll be doing it by making a deep dive into some of the questions Jesus himself asked his disciples, and other people, while he was alive and interacting with real people every day, people just like us. He asked real questions of real people, a lot of them actually, more than we can fully cover in the brief timespan of Lent. But, we can engage with some of them and that shall be our task.

I was able to do some research – thank God for Google – and quickly find a condensed list of all the questions Jesus asked. Interesting to note is that different research projects I checked out had different answers to the number of questions he actually asked people over the course of his ministry. Some had as few as a couple of dozen, and others had them as numbered in the hundreds. As I read through the research, I quickly figured out the disparity in number had everything to do with how researchers defined questions. You'd think a question would be a question but, Christology scholars, like all scholars, like to argue about minutia and as a result, some of them had a very broad definition of "question," too broad for my purposes. So, at the end of all my reading and research, I have narrowed these Jesus questions down to a list of five which seem to me to the most

pertinent to us as average, every day people just trying to figure out life and faith each day.

Today's question seemed like the best place to begin our ponderings. Ironically, it is not a question which came at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In Matthew's Gospel, where this question comes from, it surfaces closer to the end of Jesus' active ministry than it does to the beginning. Today's text from Matthew 16 relates a conversation Jesus has with his disciples after they have been with him for some time. They've heard the Sermon on the Mount and all the familiar teachings of Jesus it contains. They've witnessed many miracles of healing of everything from paralytics to demoniacs. They're well aware that Jesus makes the Temple officials really, really nervous and also that the average people – people like them – absolutely love Jesus and are now mobbing him wherever he goes. So, in a way they were probably not surprised when, after they had arrived in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus decided to sit down with them for a conversation.

“Who do people say the Son of Man is?” Jesus asks them. Kind of an awkward question to our ears. Why is he referring to himself in the third person with a weird phrase like “Son of Man,” we wonder. Well, he was making a point with the disciples. He knew very well all the miracles they had seen him perform – like the feeding of the 5000. So, he deliberately refers to himself as the Son of Man to emphasize that he is a man, and not some kind

of divine being. He is asking the disciples who the people think he is as a human. They answer him quickly – “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” In other words, the people realized he was something special but they assumed he was a great person from the past somehow magically alive again. Of course, Jesus knew that’s not who he was. And he hopes the disciples knew this too. So, he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” You’ve heard me teach and preach, he says. You’ve watched me perform miracle after miracle. You know something is going on here. Who do you – who know me better than anyone else – who do you think I am?

I always wonder when I read this if he was really worried how they would answer. Did they think he was John the Baptist come back to life? Or maybe he was Elijah come back since Elijah never died – God took him off to heaven in a flaming chariot! How would they answer him?? Luckily he didn’t have to wait long at all. Right away, Peter said, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Apparently, this is exactly the answer Jesus was hoping for because he proceeds to lavish praise upon Peter, like a student who has just solved the most difficult Algebra problem of the term. Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” Yes, Peter, Jesus is saying. That’s exactly who I am! I am God’s Son come to earth, born as a human so that the Son of Man and the

Son of God now inhabit one body. And this is so difficult to understand, Peter, that I know God gave you the answer. You could not possibly have figured this out for yourself.

Well, sort of a back-handed compliment to Peter. You're not that bright, Peter, but that's okay because God favored you with the right answer. And because I now know that God favors you, I will make you the one to carry on after me. You will build my church and the keys to the kingdom of heaven will be given to you. Wow! But, I'm pretty sure Peter had no idea what Jesus was talking about here and that's something we need to remember. We are coming into the time period in Jesus' ministry when Jesus knew this was not going to end well for him personally, but the disciples didn't know this. As far as they knew everything was going great. As far as they knew, they would be continuing on for the foreseeable future, going with Jesus as he continued doing what he had been doing – preaching, teaching and healing. So, in a very real way, Jesus, by asking this question of the disciples at this time in this way, was beginning the process of preparing them for what he knew was going to happen. He wanted them to start clarifying and articulating for themselves who he was, what he was sent by God to do, and why it mattered. He wanted them to begin the process of thinking about how life – and their work for God – would continue after he was no longer with them. His question to them – who do you say I am? – is his way of helping

them to formulate what would become known as the *koinonia* – the Good News – of Jesus the Christ that they would share with the world when he was no longer walking along side them.

That’s why this is the perfect question of Jesus for us to begin our Lenten journey together. I’m asking you to consider, to ponder deeply and prayerfully, how you personally would answer Jesus’ question to the disciples – “who do YOU say that I am?” Daunting to think about, isn’t it?? Let’s try reframing it, then. How would you describe Jesus to someone who had never heard of him before? How do you experience Jesus in your life each day? Through prayer? Meditation? Journaling? Is Jesus more Son of Man or Son of God to you? In other words, is he more human or more divine? A mixture of both?

What does it mean to think of Jesus as your “personal savior,” a phrase our conservative Christian brothers and sisters use a lot? Is it more personal – like Jesus as the closest friend imaginable who stays by your side no matter what. Or, is it more Savior with a capital “S” – the Jesus who magically makes all your bad decisions and hurtful words and actions just disappear like they never happened so you can go to heaven where everything is just perfect all the time except you have to wait until you’re dead to get there? Is Jesus both/and or either/or, or something else entirely?

Wow. Sounds pretty heady, complicated even. Who do I say Jesus is? Me? How can I be expected to answer a question like that? I don't know *anything*, we think. Ah, dear friends, that's where you are wrong! You know everything you need to know to answer this question from Jesus! "Who do YOU say that I am?" Still not sure how to answer? Okay. I'll give you a hint. Find the answers in your favorite stories about Jesus in the Bible. He's the man who heals the blind and the sick. He's the one who calms the storm and rescues Peter from drowning. He's the one who cries when his friend Lazarus dies. He's the one who reminds us that God expects us to care for the least of these all the time, without counting the cost. He's the one we sing about in "Jesus Loves Me" and "What A Friend I Have in Jesus" and most of our favorite hymns. Dear friends, Jesus is the one who guides us on the journey of a life time as each of us seeks to answer his question in our own unique way. So, who *do* you say Jesus is? Finding the answer together is our quest for this Lenten season. Are you in? I sure hope so... Amen.