

Who Is Jesus?  
Mark 8:27-30  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
August 20, 2023  
Rev. Jill Cameron Michel

I am hoping that by this point you are coming to worship eager to hear what the day's question is. As you have figured out by now, today we are asking, "Who Is Jesus?"

In some ways this seems like a simple straightforward question but once we start answering it, we realize there are different ways to do so.

In fact, I want to start today by inviting us into a little exercise. We are going to look at some pieces of artwork of Jesus. We're going to just spend a couple minutes looking at these. As we do, I want you to pay attention to the following things:

- What do you notice?
- What do you feel?
- What do you resonate with?
- And what do you push back against?

Pay attention to these things within yourself as you see these various pictures. (*Play slideshow*)

So, I am curious how you responded to each of those. Because what we saw in those pictures is a reminder that there are many ways to think about Jesus.

That group of pictures began with several that were likely very familiar to most of us - pictures that those of us, especially those who grew up as Christians in the Midwest of the United States over the last several generations would have likely seen hanging in our churches or our homes. Those first three - the familiar headshot of Jesus, a picture of Jesus as a shepherd holding a little lamb, and Jesus knocking at the door - those likely felt very familiar.

Within this group of pictures we also saw Jesus doing different things. Pictures that represent familiar stories like Jesus visiting the home of Mary and Martha, welcoming the children, and eating with his friends - these are likely the easier ones for us. But then there was Jesus on the cross and Jesus throwing over the tables in the temple. These are also important, because if we embrace the fullness of who he was, we have to admit that his life wasn't all serene snuggles and that he was often speaking prophetically to those in power. Even doing so in a way that risked, and finally ended, his life.

Additionally, I feel certain that you noticed the various cultural, racial, and ethnic ways Jesus was represented. The pictures that are likely most familiar to most of us show Jesus appearing very European. While his clothing might match the time and place of his birth, in

so many of the pictures we are used to seeing his hair color, skin tone, eye color, and features reflect a much more European descent.

But within the group of pictures we looked at we saw Asian Jesus, black Jesus, and even a few that are probably closer to what a middle eastern Jewish man would actually look like. And seeing these various representations serves not only as a reminder that Jesus was *not* a blue-eyed white guy, but also as a reminder that people tend to connect differently to those like them, and so we connect differently to Jesus when we can see ourselves in him.

So, I wonder how you felt about those pictures. Was it refreshing to see so many different views of Jesus? Was it difficult? Did it expand your understanding in some way? Did it push you in ways that were uncomfortable? Did you answer “yes” to all those questions? And always remember that I am happy to talk further...you can feel free to email me and start a conversation about this if you want.

The reality is that while this exercise might have stretched some of us, this is actually a very limited group of pictures. But it is a good reminder that answering the question, “Who is Jesus?” is more complex than simple.

Add to this, the discussion that arises from today’s text, a discussion about a different aspect of Jesus’ identity and it gets *even more* complex.

Here in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus, who has been teaching and healing, responding to needs and pushing back against the powerful, asks his closest followers what they have been hearing from others. And then he takes it a step further and asks, “But who do *you* say that I am?”

We hear Peter’s response, “You are the Messiah.” In fact, we in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) have long modeled our confession of faith on this passage.

But even that seemingly simple answer from Peter isn’t really simple.

Not only do we as individuals have different definitions for what we mean when we affirm Jesus as Messiah. But, what those around Jesus would have known is that “Messiah” wasn’t language reserved for Jesus as we have tended to do. It was a term that Caesar would have used alongside others like “Lord” and “Savior.” So, while we, who live post-Easter and many generations later, may hear a particular claim about the unique divinity of Jesus, those around Jesus likely heard a challenge to the powers that be, an acknowledgement that Jesus offered an alternative vision, an alternative kingdom.

*And*, there’s something else to consider: what if what we say about Jesus also impacts us? Not just in the sense of what we claim or believe, but what if our claims about who Jesus is say something about who we are or who we are committed to become?

As seminary professor Karoline Lewis writes, “Who do you say that I am?” is at the same time, “who will you say that you are?” That’s the rub of this question, the heart of its difficulty.

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If we only had to provide an answer to Jesus' question of *his* identity, that would be one thing. However, answering the question of Jesus' identity is also having to give voice to our own.

Professor Lewis goes on writing, "Who you say Jesus is, is who you have decided to be. You can't answer Jesus' inquiry without revealing who you are. Or, we could switch it around. Who you are reveals who you have decided Jesus to be. Jesus' question is not a test. It's not about getting the answer right. It's the moment when you come face-to-face with your own commitment, your own discipleship, your own identity. It's the moment when you have to admit to what extent how you follow Jesus actually connects with some sort of confession of who you believe Jesus to be" ([Who Do You Say that I Am? - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)).

So, who is Jesus?

Is he a historical person from the past who made a great contribution to the world?

Is he a divine being who you admire from a distance as you wait for him to bestow blessings upon you?

Is he a human being who was an open channel to God, someone who inspires you to become more open to the presence of God yourself?

Is he someone whose compassion inspires your compassion, someone whose awareness of others inspires you to pay greater attention, someone whose activism inspires your own?

Is he someone you read about? Is he someone you follow?

Who is Jesus? The answers are varied and complex. And it is likely we know him more fully when we embrace the complexity of who he is.

Who is Jesus? Is he one to be followed...is he one after whom we can model our lives...is he one whose presence might just change *us* if we are willing...is here all of this and more?

Who is Jesus? This isn't a question simply for today, but a question we will continue to ask as we grow and discover and find ourselves shaped by him that we might make a difference in the world. Amen.