

Sermon Proper 16 A

St. John the Evangelist, Jamaica Plain

August 21, 2011

Anne Mansfield Minton

When I teach about the Abrahamic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, I often ask how each religion knows what God wants of them and how they find the will of God and the dream of God for their lives. For Judaism I hold up a copy of the Torah. For Islam I hold up a copy of the Quran. For Christianity I hold up an icon of Jesus Christ. For, although Christians certainly read the Bible and listen to the Bible read at every worship service, for us it is really **Jesus** who is the revelation of God. It is **Jesus** who shows us the pattern of our lives and the dream of God for us and for the whole creation.

I once had a student from Pakistan, a wonderful young man, and a deeply observant Muslim. He asked one day in the middle of a World Religions class, “Why do Christians talk about Jesus all

the time?” A very good question. And the answer is because he is our path and our window into God.

That’s why today’s question from Jesus is so important for us. When Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” and when he asks the same question of us it is not just one question among many questions. No, actually, it is **THE** question.

In today’s gospel Jesus first asks his disciples what other people are saying about him. Turns out that Jesus reminds people of some major figures from their history. Apparently people were really clear that Jesus was very different from the many itinerant preachers and healers of his day. The disciples tell him that people think that Jesus is a prophet. Perhaps Elijah, strong and powerful who took no abuse from anyone. And who challenged the priests of Baal. Who took on some of the religious leaders of the land. Or John the Baptist who spoke the truth to a tyrant who didn’t want to hear it and ended up imprisoned and murdered. Or Jeremiah who also confronted the powers that be and was often hated and persecuted for speaking unpleasant truths to a government

unwilling to listen. At one point Jeremiah, to protest a treaty that Israel was about to sign, stood outside the government offices with a yoke around his neck to symbolize the yoke of oppression which the government was about to take on. So, people think that Jesus is a prophet - strong, fierce, uppity, justice-seeking.

But, then Jesus looks directly at his disciples and says to them: “But who do YOU say that I am? Now, this is not a question and answer session like school or like a TV program, where all we have to do is come up with the right answer to get the prize. No, this exchange is really about an encounter with Jesus. When Jesus looks at them and asks them “Who do you say that I am?” their response is about who Jesus is **for them**. It makes me wonder why Jesus even asks them this question. Why does it matter to him? Because they are his? Because they are traveling with him? Because they are his friends and companions? Because they will carry on his work? Because he loves them?

Peter answers Jesus’ question: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” It was only one sentence but Peter’s answer

shapes his life. His answer leads him to dusty roads in Galilee and Judea, to a mount of transfiguration, to a procession of palms, to a garden of betrayal and to an empty tomb. And then to encounters with the Risen Christ and ultimately to Rome and a martyr's death. Peter's answer determined the course of his life and set him on a path which he followed until the end.

And over the centuries Jesus asks this question of all his followers. Today he asks it of you and of me. "Who do YOU say that I am?" The answer determines what we think is important and essential to being a Christian. It shapes our ideas about what the church should be about and what it needs to do. I was raised Roman Catholic and formed in a very Jesus-centered spirituality. It was deeply sacramental, shaped around liturgy and communion. Fundamentally for me the center of the Christian life was going to Mass (which we did every day) and being with Jesus in the sacrament and in church. In fact it was always deeply troubling to me- actually it didn't make any sense- that although Jesus was in church that we would leave church, get in the car and go home.

Why go home to eat pot roast and mashed potatoes on Sunday afternoon when Jesus was in church? What this meant, as well, was that I understood the church to be a center for liturgy, sacramental life, prayer, processions, hymns, adoration and praise.

Is it any wonder that I entered a cloistered convent? That way I never had to leave the building. And, when we did have pot roast and mashed potatoes it was in a room walking distance of the chapel! Then when I did my dissertation I wrote about a 17th century French theologian for whom Jesus was essentially a man of prayer and adoration, who spent all his time alone worshipping God. This theologian, Cardinal Pierre de Berulle, wrote extensively about Jesus and his earthly life and mission and never once mentioned Jesus' disciples, nor his teaching, healing, walks through Galilee or confrontations with the authorities. So, clearly for Berulle and for the priests whom he trained the church's mission is to be a place of adoration and prayer, centered on the Eucharist. None of Berulle's priests would have been trained to work for social justice, challenge the monarchy, heal the sick or

feed the poor. And, over the centuries the question about who Jesus is shaped the life of the believer and also shaped the mission of the church.

So, when Jesus asks you this question: “Who do YOU say that I am?” how do you answer? Jesus the healer? The prophet? The teacher? The ethical model? The one who welcomes sinners and outcasts? The Savior? The Risen Lord? Is it Jesus walking along the Sea of Galilee? Or Jesus on the cross? Or Jesus ruler of the cosmos? Whoever Jesus is for you, it has probably shaped how you understand your Christian life and what you think the church and this parish ought to focus on, ought to be about. When you go to a Vestry meeting you probably go with assumptions about who Jesus is and hence what St. John’s ought to look like and what it ought to be doing. When you come to worship on Sunday you bring with you your answer to who Jesus is for you and it is the filter through which you hear the readings, listen to the sermon and sing the hymns.

But it can change. Over the years my understanding of who Jesus is has expanded. New experiences and different people have had a hand in changing my answer to his question. And, so have my prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit who is always stirring things up and moving things around, creating new visions and amazing new possibilities. This may also have happened to you. Your childhood answer to this question may be very different from the answer you would give today.

But, our individual answers to Jesus' question are not all there is. You are not just individuals. You are a community. The Holy Spirit has gathered all of you here at St. John's with different gifts and graces, strengths and limitations, virtues and faults to create among you the mystical body of Christ. So, when Christ asks you as a parish: "Who do you say that I am?" your answer determines how you live together at St. John's, what shape your community life takes, what is important to you, where you put your time and energy and money, what you pray about, what you fear, what you long for, what makes you laugh and what makes

you cry. Part of what the Spirit intends for this gathered community is that you share with one another your answer to today's question. Who is Jesus for you? And, in the process of answering this question and listening to one another's answers you get a broader and more complete vision of who Jesus is and what you as a parish can do and be to mirror Jesus to the world.

Different denominations have different answers to this question as do different parishes and different individuals. But how we envision Jesus and who we say that he is will shape who we are and what we think is important and what we do and don't do.

“Who do you say that I am?” Many of us struggle with this question and with our answer. We have the answers of our ancestors in the faith, in creeds and liturgies and theologies, in prayers and in hymns. But Christ is alive and the Holy Spirit is poured out on us to give us the courage to answer Jesus' question for our own time. For today. For Here. And Now. We move into God's future without all the answers! But we move in faith,

hearing Jesus' question posed to us. Finding our own answer,
finding the answers of our community and living into those
answers day after day until the day God calls us home.