

**Who is he?**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts on the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 27, 2017.

*He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Matthew 16:15*

It is to Caesarea Philippi in northern Galilee that Jesus withdraws with his disciples to work out a strategy for his mission. If they are to form the church as the community of believers and followers of Christ, they have to know and be able to say who he is. They need to articulate what they believe in the face of persecution and death.

They are gathered at the Banyan Springs, a region with a history of a multiplicity of ancient religions with no fewer than fourteen temples to the ancient Syrian god of Baal. If you go there, you can still see the cavern wall in which there are niches that once held carved statues of the gods of ancient Greece, including the god of Pan. Nearby stands a great marble temple built by Herod the Great symbolizing all the power and grandeur of Rome.

It is here that Jesus, the itinerate rabbi from Nazareth, gathers with his disciples. It is here, in the midst of all the reminders of ancient gods and symbols of power that Jesus confronts them with the question of who he is. He wants them to be certain that they know who he is if they are to succeed in carrying out his mission. He first asks what other people are saying he is. The disciples awkwardly respond with suggestions that some say he is John the Baptist while others say he is Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.

Having told him what others think, it is now time for them to say what they think. Jesus asks them, But who do you say that I am? (Matthew 16:15) Predictably, it is the impetuous Peter who is the first to respond. From what I read of Peter, he is probably a large burly man who is aggressive, impetuous and outspoken. He runs a successful fishing business and lives in a spacious home with an extended family. Whenever there is an issue or a question, he can be counted on to be the first to speak. When confronted with the question of who Jesus is, he doesn't hold back. He boldly proclaims, You are the Messiah. You are the Christ of God. (Matthew 16:15) "Messiah" refers to the one who is to come and "Christ" refers to the anointed one of God. For all our efforts, human language cannot adequately describe the full meaning of God coming to us in the person of Christ.

What each of us believes about Jesus is personal and private, but it can never be on hearsay. We have to say for ourselves who we believe him to be. Some believe him to be a good man, a teacher of morality, or a prophet. Many boldly confess him to be the very incarnation of God who came to redeem all humanity. The Jesus we once knew may not be the Jesus we come to know. The Jesus we come to know is authenticated by our own personal experience in understanding. You can read volumes about him and still not know him personally. You can earn graduate degrees in theology and read the works of great writers on his life and teachings, but if you don't know him through personal experience, you can't know who he really is. The question asked of the disciples is the question that is asked of all of us. Who do you say he is? Peter doesn't hesitate; neither should we.

When Jesus tells Peter that on this rock his church will be built, it is a play on words. In the Greek, the name Peter is Petros and the word for rock is petra. Peter's name in Aramaic is Cephas, which also means rock. Some claim that this means that Jesus intended for Peter and his successors to be the head of the church. Others insist that it is on the strength of Peter's rock-like faith that church is built. The controversy has continued down through the centuries with each side claiming their point. It is our testimony that holds Christ in place as the chief cornerstone in building up the church.

This most important question so vital in the first century is equally important for us in the early twenty-first century. God entered our human condition by coming to us in the form of one of us. As God's anointed one, Jesus has the authority to speak for God because he is the incarnation of the Word, the mind of God.

Because it is personal, you may be reluctant to talk about what you believe. You may be uncomfortable with saying what you believe because it might make others uncomfortable. We have become so sensitive about offending those who believe differently that we run the risk of Christ gets watered down to a mere figure in historical and literary culture. For me, Jesus is more than a just and good man, a teacher or a prophet.

I believe that God came to us in human form as one of us in the person of Christ. We need never apologize or be self-conscious about what we believe. There is no need to equivocate about who we believe Jesus is. It is he who helps to make sense of what is happening in the world. It is he who sustains us when we grapple for the meaning of events beyond our comprehension.

I learned to know Christ more personally in the experience of personal forgiveness. I came to know him when I realized that it is just as important accept my own forgiveness as it is for me to forgive others. The experience of being redeemed makes it possible to live life free from guilt, doubt and uncertainty. Being redeemed means loving and respecting others because we have learned to love and respect ourselves. When we find ourselves being disappointed, when we feel let down, it is a time to remember that God loves us despite our own frailties. This is what it means to know Christ not in the abstract, but as a living presence.

Who do we say you are? Rather than thinking that you came to church this morning, think of yourself as being the church. The building and the liturgy is only part of who we are. We are the church learning to love, trust and accept each other unconditionally. We come full circle when we can know and accept others as we know and accept ourselves.

In the end, none of us is perfect, just forgiven.