

Who is Jesus? Matthew 16:13-20

Every year around this time, Beloit College releases what is called its Mindset List about the class of incoming freshmen, which provides a look at the cultural touchstones that shape the lives of students entering college. This year's list reports this year's incoming freshmen are the last class to have been born last century. For them, the Panama Canal has always belonged to Panama and Macau has been part of China. It is doubtful that they have ever used or heard the high-pitched whine of a dial-up modem. Joe DiMaggio and Walter Peyton have always been dead, Nolan Ryan has always been in Cooperstown, and Dan Marino and Steve Young have always been retired from football. They have always been able to communicate using emoji's. They are the first generation for whom a "phone" has been primarily a video game, direction finder, electronic telegraph, and research library, not something to use to make phone calls.

While lists like this can give us a good overview of what a group of people are like, they don't always give us the full picture. Not everyone grew up the same way or in the same place. What's true of one new freshman isn't necessarily true of another. Just as with all groups, we need to get to know them as individuals. What's important isn't just what is true generally. What's important is getting to know them individually.

Jesus does that in today's Gospel lesson. He begins with an open-ended question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" He wants to know the general feeling of the people around him, and he wants to know if the disciples have been paying attention to what's going on around them. They give the answers they've heard, that Jesus is "John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." The people are putting Jesus in line with the prophets they know. Jesus had picked up John's message of preaching repentance and proclaiming the kingdom of God. Elijah never died, but instead was carried up to heaven in a fiery chariot, and to this day an empty place is left at Passover meals as Jews wait for Elijah to return. Other prophets had come and gone, calling the people to repent and return to God, and Jesus certainly fit into their mold. But that's it. The crowds, Jesus' friends, and even Jesus' enemies had some ideas about who he was, but no one knew for sure.

Then Jesus gets specific. "But who do you say that I am?" That's the important question. It's one thing to know about what happens in general. It's another to make it personal. It's one thing to know what the crowds who have only heard bits and pieces of Jesus' teaching, who have heard rumors of what he said and did, thought of Jesus. It's another thing for Jesus to ask the disciples, the ones who have been following him, learning from him, watching him, seeing him, believing in him.

Peter gets the answer right. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." For the first time in the Gospel, Jesus is acknowledged as who he is. Others had given partial answers. The disciples had been amazed earlier when Jesus calmed the storm, but this confession doesn't come out of amazement at a miracle. It comes out of the time spent following and learning from Jesus. It comes from hearing his words and seeing his miracles. But most of all, it comes from God.

Peter could not have come up with the correct answer on his own. Through hearing the words of Jesus, the Holy Spirit worked to create the faith in him that came out in that confession. The same Holy Spirit works to create faith in us, too, through the words of Jesus, through learning about Jesus from our family and friends, and through Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

Those questions come to us today, as well. Who do people say Jesus is? Brittany, a millennial, talks about being committed to Jesus as a pivotal figure of world history, but only a man. Millennials in general seem to have generally favorable views of Jesus, but are the age group least likely to be personally committed to him. They doubt his miracles and express skepticism about his resurrection. As the Barna Group identified in "5 Popular Beliefs about Jesus"...

First, "the vast majority of Americans believe Jesus was a real person."

Second, "Younger generations are increasingly less likely to believe Jesus was God." Here's some detail. "People are much less confident in the divinity of Jesus. Most adults believe Jesus was God (56%), while about one-quarter say he was only a religious or spiritual

leader like Mohammed or the Buddha (26%). The remaining one in six say they aren't sure if Jesus was divine (18%). Millennials are the only generation among whom fewer than half believe Jesus was God (48%).”

Third, “Americans are divided on whether Jesus was sinless.” 52% say He committed sins and 56% of Millennials believe Jesus committed sins.

Fourth, “Most Americans say they have made a commitment to Jesus Christ.” In light of doubts about His divinity and sinlessness, what does a commitment mean?

And fifth, “People are conflicted between ‘Jesus’ and ‘Good Deeds’ as the way to heaven.” “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Barna president David Kinnaman sums it up: “Americans dedication to Jesus is, in most cases, a mile wide and an inch deep.”

Who do you say Jesus is? When it all comes down to it, we're left with a decision CS Lewis described as deciding if Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. Either Jesus was who he said he was—and who Peter said he was—or he must be rejected and denied as crazy or a crook. Lewis writes:

“I am here trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things that Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any of that patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. Nor did he intend to.”

If you're here on a Sunday morning, you've probably already made up your mind. If you haven't, though, I pray the same Spirit who worked faith in Peter works faith in you, so you can confess, say the same thing,

that we do, that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, who came into the world to die on the cross for the sins of the whole world.

That confession, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, is the foundation the church was built on. It was the foundation Peter and the other disciples would build their lives on. As we follow in their footsteps, may it be the foundation we build our lives on, as well.

Pastor David Beagley
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center
August 27, 2017