

Who Is Jesus?

Matthew 16:13-20

August 21, 2011

United Memorial

Rev. Catherine MacDonald

What is the first thing that is often asked of you when you meet someone for the first time?

What do you do for a living?

Does that define who you are?

Who are you?

If I asked YOU that question what would you say?

Mother, father, sister, brother, son, daughter, friend, worker, organist, PR professional, accountant... so on.

How we define ourselves is often connected to our relationships.

Relationships with family members, relationships with employers or employees, relationship with the world around us.

Does any one of the words that could be used to describe you encompass the totality of who you are?

If I asked you who Jesus is for you, what would you say?

That can be a deceptively simple question.

Or a hard one... as my partner can attest to when I asked him that question late Saturday night!

And the answer you give might depend on a number of factors.

It may depend on your age, your economic status, your personal experience of loss, your upbringing, or a whole host of other things.

Some of the words that we use to describe Jesus may be the same ones used to describe us.

Son, friend, healer, preacher, homeless person, teacher, saviour, redeemer, Son of God

Just like us, Jesus was and is described by his relationships.

And just like us, I don't think it is possible to sum up Jesus in a word or two.

And we may have very different pictures and images of him.

In theological studies I learned that everyone has a particular 'Christology' of Jesus.

Isn't that a great word to confuse us?

Christology is the study of Jesus... and encompasses the way in which we view him... and the way in which we view him impacts how we respond to his teachings and messages.

For instance, for those who like me, have what is defined as a rather 'low' Christology, we believe that the most important thing about Jesus is the way he lived and what he taught.

For some, with a 'higher' Christology, the most important thing is his death and resurrection.

And most of the folks in the United Church fall somewhere between those two.

In our passage from Matthew today, Jesus asks the disciples who the people are saying he is.

And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

For Peter, Jesus was the Son of God, the one who was sent to the Jewish people to set them free from the Roman oppression.

In response to Peter's words, Jesus calls him the rock and states that upon Peter's testimony, Jesus will build his church.

But then Jesus goes on to warn the disciples not to say anything about him being the Messiah.

It's important to remember a couple of things about this passage.

One is that it was written, not as events were taking place, and that there were no churches in Jesus' day.

Two, the gospels were written, not as events were taking place, but after Jesus' death.

The writer of the gospel of Matthew was part of a Jewish community and it was written in a time when to be a follower of Jesus was dangerous... after all Jesus had been crucified as a criminal, so secrecy about Jesus was to be expected and critical to avoid death like him.

Jesus followers were very careful about with whom they spoke of Jesus.

Their very lives were at risk.

However, we all know that they did not keep silent.

Otherwise we wouldn't be here today.

Who is Jesus for you today?

In Canada, we can answer that question without fear of any reprisals.

Our lives and our livelihoods are not at risk.

But do we speak of him?

Do we speak of the transforming power he has had in our lives?

Or do we keep silent?

Afraid to offend?

Afraid that he doesn't have anything to offer to our world?

Afraid to be lumped in with some of what passes for Christianity in the media?

For me, it's that last one.

It's kept me silent when others seem so convinced of the correctness of their views when I had questions.

It's kept me silent when Jesus' words have been quoted to me out of context.

It's kept me silent when I could have offered words of hope or words of challenge.

I think it's kept a whole bunch of us silent.

What has happened because we, who believe in Jesus teaching of love God and love your neighbour as yourself, who welcomed outcasts and strangers, and spoke of a God of love of grace, remained silent?

We have ceded our place in the public sphere to those who would condemn and judge... all in Jesus' name.

There was a time when we could remain silent... when we could rely on our surrounding culture to tell the story of Jesus... but that time has passed... and our time more closely resembles the early church's time... when it was very much a minority.

But... I will remain silent no longer.

I am working on ways to share my faith with others, inside and out of this place and church circles.

I am working on this, not to convert those who may have other religions, not to impose my beliefs on those who have their own, but to offer the story of how my life has been changed because of Jesus.

It's surprising how many church people, including clergy find this challenging.

A group of us, both clergy and lay people, have started meeting to wrestle with how best we can share the message of Jesus.

We don't have any firm answers yet, and I don't think we will come up with the ONE definitive answer.

But all of us have experienced the transforming power of Jesus in our lives and we want to offer that to others and we want to equip others to do the same.

Who is Jesus for you?

What impact has he had in your life?

Don't be alarmed if the answer changes over the years.

God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are working in each one of us, enlightening us and transforming.

How can you share that with others?

What do I say at the beginning of just about every service?

“In the name of Jesus Christ, who is at the centre of our faith, welcome to worship this morning.”

Jesus is at the centre of our faith... with courage and faith, we can tell others about him.

Thanks be to God for that opportunity, amen.