

Matthew 16:13-20 – Riikka Halme-Berneking and Steve Berneking

In our gospel reading for this morning, the first question Jesus asks the disciples is what other people are saying about him. This must have felt rather easy to answer, some say this, some say that. Also for us, we can easily quote scholars and doctrines, books and even Peter, and we can certainly learn from other people's observations.

But the second question Jesus asks is emphatically directed to his followers right there: "How about you? who do y'all say I am?" Now it gets personal. For whatever reason, we only get Simon Peter's answer. Simon proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah, the long-awaited God-chosen savior who was expected, in this context, to lead the Jews to overthrow the Roman oppressors. According to Matthew, Simon also says: You are "the Son of Living God."

Jesus praises Simon's answer, maybe not so much for it being the A+ correct answer, but for the fact that it was revealed to Simon by the living God. Jesus says: "Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah. You didn't get this from humans, you got this from God." It is a revelation, a gift, really. Jesus talks to his follower mentioning his full name. And then, marking a pivotal moment in Simon's life, Jesus changes his name to Peter, the Rock, the solid one.

We did crowdsourcing for this homily. During Wednesday Words we invited responses to Jesus' question "Who do y'all say I am?" We heard from several of you. Others certainly pondered the question. Thank you for your participation!

Reading your personal responses felt like reading sacred texts, a result of a living relationship with the Divine. One of you said: "Jesus looks us into our eyes, and calls us by name," another one: "Jesus was the human face of God, revealing that God lives with and within us, and that God is love." One answer to Jesus' question "Who do you say I am" was simply "Everyone!". Another said: "Jesus resides within each of us pushing us to love each other, to feed the hungry, care for the poor, visit the prisoners. If we look, we can see Jesus in others' eyes." Someone else said: "Jesus means goodness to me. He has given me a path of ethics to follow. He offers forgiveness when the situation seems impossible." Jesus was also described as "the one who is the Way of Love" and "the one who is practically perfect".

Many of you said things like "my answer depends on when you ask me" or "Like Jesus, I'm living and so ever-changing", or "my answer has changed, but I can't say how very well", and "the question is posed for each new day and life situation." One of you said: "being in an ongoing relationship with him is very difficult and hard and messy, but can be rewarding."

This struggle seems to have been true also with Peter, as we can see in the very next paragraph in Matthew's narrative. Shortly after Peter's award-winning response and affirming name change Jesus starts talking to his disciples about his suffering, death

and resurrection which would soon happen in Jerusalem. This doesn't fit with Peter's idea of Messiah, and he immediately tries to correct Jesus saying: "God forbid that this would happen to you!" This is met with harsh words from Jesus telling Peter to go away with his human way of thinking. Suddenly, the certainty of who Jesus is crumbles even for Peter the Rock.

Peter knew that Jesus was the Messiah; now he realized he needed to adjust or tweak that assertion: Jesus was not exactly the kind of Messiah they were expecting. This Messiah had to suffer, die and be resurrected.

Just as for Peter, it is for us: when life gets difficult and our expectations are not met, when our understanding of the divine is challenged, we have to be prepared to humbly rethink our answers.

In any close relationship, it is a life-long task to get to know one another. Just about the time I think I really know this guy, my dear husband, I ask myself who is he? I am always discovering something new in our relationship. It is exciting! When he asks me "who am I to you", I get to express my love, admiration and commitment to him. It becomes a love poem that also recognizes the challenge.

Our relationship with the Living God is ever-new. It is comforting for me to know that we are not expected to know the "right answer" about Jesus and check a box, be done with it. See, knowing for certain who Jesus is is not a prerequisite for being his follower. As we are following this Jesus and figuring out who he really is for us, over and over, we also get to express our love and admiration directly to him, in second person, intimately. The Son of Living God calls us into an intimate, dynamic relationship full of surprises, good and bad. What we do know for sure is that the Living God is with us, in times of confidence and in times of doubt, in times of strength and in times of fear or fatigue.

For five months, we have not been able to gather inside these walls. This is the time and opportunity for us, as Church, to take the comforting answers we have discovered in this safe place out into the world, to test and live them out, as we walk with Christ, as "little Christs".

In our immediate context, there are so many people isolated in their homes, some people rebuilding their homes and businesses after recent floods, and we are all navigating through the onslaught of the media about the upcoming elections... will our neighbors be able to see clearly in our way of walking our answers to the question of who Jesus is? Are we willing to learn more about who Jesus is and how to follow him? Will our neighbors be able to experience the way of Love as we interact with them?

May it be so. Amen.