

A Sermon by the Rev. Jeffrey A. Packard	Prepared for the congregation of Christ Episcopal Church, Spotsylvania, VA
To be delivered on August 27, 2017	On the occasion of the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16A

Matthew 16:13-20

Saying Who Jesus Is

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” Jesus is asking a general question. What are they saying about me? What do the polls say this week? His disciples respond appropriately with a smattering of examples of the sorts of things people are saying about Jesus. They appear to be trying to make sense of his ministry and proclamation in the context of the Hebrew Scriptures, the ancient prophesies, and the current expectations associated with the Messiah, or other people who may signal the beginning of the messianic age. No surprises there, really. I’m sure Jesus could have guessed as much. Then he hits them with the real question: “But who do you say that I am?” Suddenly the question is not an academic one. It is not about what other people think or say. It is not about reporting to him what they have heard. Suddenly the question is very personal. It is about what they believe in their hearts. It is about what they are willing to proclaim about this person they have chosen to follow and commit their lives to. Suddenly Jesus requires them, with this question, to step up and be real.

Peter is the one who responds first. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Of course Jesus isn’t only interested in having his pupils give him the right answer when he asks them the question. The most important thing is that they make that proclamation in the real world when they are talking to other people. What he really cares about is what his disciples say about him as they live their lives, how they witness to his love in their words and actions, how they *say who he is* in their daily lives.

Isn’t that what this question is all about? It isn’t about getting it right on the exam. It’s about getting it right in life. Who do you say Jesus is... in your ethical life... in your economic

life... in your political life... in how you treat the other people you meet every day... in how you use the resources God has entrusted to you... in how you stand up for those who don't have a voice?

There is so much behind this deceptively simple question. It has to do with how we live out our lives as Christians. We proclaim that Jesus is someone who cares about the poor and the needy every time we offer food to someone through our food pantry, or give them a back pack with school supplies. We proclaim that Jesus is someone who cares about people's personal and family needs when we offer quality stuff at affordable prices in our thrift shop. We proclaim that Jesus is someone who cares about each person's dignity when we greet everyone, whether it is in the food pantry or the thrift shop or a visitor on Sunday morning, as a brother or sister in Christ. We proclaim that Jesus is someone who cares about children and youth when we offer Christian formation programs that not only teach them about the beliefs and practices of our Faith, but nurture them as individuals, and create a loving, caring community for them. These are some ways that we as a parish *say who Jesus is* in our common life.

Of course we each as individuals *say who Jesus is* every day. How would the person who stood behind you in the grocery store line last week have heard you saying *who Jesus is* based on how you acted? Would that person have heard you saying that Jesus is loving and reaches out to all? Or would that person have heard you saying that Jesus is cold and distant, or perhaps even rude? This is how we witness to *who Jesus is*. People hear our witness in how we behave.

But don't think that lets you off the hook. Peter was praised when he proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. He put words to it. He named it. He didn't just live a good life and hope that someone noticed. More and more we live in a society that is knowledgeable and influenced less and less by the Christian faith. People still identify

themselves as Christian, but they don't practice that faith in any practical way. So we have a job to do that is increasingly like the apostles and the first generation of Christians. When they went out into the world, they had to introduce people to Jesus. They literally had to tell people who he was, because people didn't know who he was. That is more and more true for us today. Not only do people not know Jesus, they often have a misconception of who he is. So we have to introduce, and in many cases reintroduce people to him. Now, I know you're shy, and you don't like to talk about your faith. That's not how you were raised. But you need to get over that. You need to find ways to *say who Jesus is* using words, not just actions. We need to get better at sharing our own faith, and inviting others to participate in it too. That may be as simple as inviting someone to join you as you volunteer at the thrift shop. Inviting someone to church always works too.

As we prepare to say goodbye in a few weeks, I encourage you to think about *who you say Jesus is*, in your life and as a parish. If I can leave you with one thing as your pastor and preacher, I would hope it is a new commitment to proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ, by word and example. Please think about that. Pray about that... as if the life of the Church depends on it... as if the life of the world depends on it.

Amen.