

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Who I Am

Exodus 3.1-2, 13-15; Matthew 16.13-20

Russ Dean, August 24, 2008



The question stands at the heart of Christian faith. Just as it pierced to the heart, and into the heart of the minds, of those first disciples, it has the same power today: *Who do you say that I am?* (Matthew 16.15) Jesus was talking to them all; in good Southern-ese we could translate his question: Who do ya'll say that I am? But it has a singular quality to it, and I believe it is the question that confronts each and every person who seeks to understand the religion called by his name, a religion now addressed by more than two billion people around this world.

If Jesus were here today, he may well ask us: Park Road Baptist Church: *Who do you say I am?* Or, more pointedly... Matt and Mary, Jackson and Jan, Sam and Sue and Carol and Ken... *Who do you say I am?* The question is important, I believe, because its answer defines us, not him. When I can say who Jesus is, for me, maybe for the first time, I can know Who I Am.

Recently I received a hand-written letter in the mail. Most of the mail I get is junk, so I approach any hand-addressed envelopes with a different emotion, but I wasn't quite ready for what I encountered. It was a scathing rebuke of my ministry here at Park Road Baptist Church. The writer had just been in a service here and had come away disappointed – you see, he had not heard the name “Jesus” spoken often enough times in the minutes he spent in this sanctuary. Though I had quoted Jesus’ life-affirming words, “*I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly*” (John 10.10), I had not, according to the longhand I was reading, offered in those moments a clear picture of the Jesus who offers that life, nor made the plan of his salvation

succinct enough. I had not offered to the congregation an opportunity to call Jesus “Lord and Savior.” The fact that I was delivering a funeral eulogy was unimportant; my unforgiveable oversight was the absence of the evangelistic call to know Jesus by those names. My critic, whom I believe to be sincere in his faith, quite impassioned by his Lord and Savior, even felt the need to say, “Pastor, do I need to ask if you are saved?”

Well, I am sorry that I disappointed, for no less than my critic does, I honor and value the name and the life and the importance of Jesus of Nazareth for this world. I do not believe you can encounter this first-century Jewish rabbi in any real way and go away unchanged. And, if we do not offer that encounter here – even if we offer it in a different way than my critic would have us offer it (and I am fine with that) – if we do not, then as a Christian congregation, we have lost our way.

It is the witness of the Church for 2,000 years. Meeting Jesus changes us.

Jesus changed the life of Clive Staples Lewis, a member of the English faculty at Oxford in the early and mid 1900s and an atheist since his childhood. In his book, *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis describes his conversion experience:

You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.

Lewis’s turning became the source of his life’s work, as he became one of the most prolific writers of Christian fiction of all times, and one of the last century’s greatest apologists of Christian faith. Of his encounter with Jesus he says:

You must make a 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.¹

Who do you say that I am?

Jesus changed the life of Marcus Borg, who had been raised in the church and who had become, ironic as it may be, a secular “Jesus Scholar” in the academic world. In his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Borg tells of an invitation he received to speak to an Episcopal men’s group. His inviter said to him, “Talk to us about Jesus, *and make it personal.*”² Borg recalls those words as part of his own turning, again, to Jesus. Jesus had become for him an object of study – perhaps that is not so different from those, like my recent critic, who have made Jesus an object of worship – and it was in letting Jesus become real, allowing himself to think about Jesus in personal terms, in de-objectifying Jesus, that Marcus Borg, the Jesus scholar, had his encounter. Of that encounter, Borg says:

Now I no longer see the Christian life as being primarily about believing... Rather, the Christian life is about entering into a relationship with that to which the Christian tradition points, which may be spoken of as God, or the Spirit... or the risen living Christ.³

Who do you say that I am?

Jesus changed the life of Anne Lamott, the acclaimed writer who was raised in a virulently anti-Christian household. In the midst of a crisis of her life Lamott encountered him this way:

I had a cigarette and turned off the light. After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it

¹ From his book, *Mere Christianity*. These quotations are in my files, but I do not have a specific page reference.

² Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p.3.

³ Borg, p.17.

was my father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there... But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends, I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, "I would rather die."

[A week later, with Jesus still stalking her, like a little cat following at her heels, after a moving moment in a church service Lamott says]... I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, "[Forget] it: I quit." I took a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in."⁴

Who do you say that I am?

Jesus has changed the world. Not because he is an iconic figure of history. History makes its own heroes. The fact that he makes the cover of Time magazine and Newsweek on at least an annual basis, is a product of his power, not the cause of it. No, the power of Jesus is not his ability to mobilize armies in his name. This historical fact is one of the tragic mistakes of religion. It is not because the conversion of the Emperor Constantine seventeen centuries ago launched Christianity out of the shadows and onto the world scene as a major religion. In some ways, this was also a mistake.⁵ It is not because his name can be made into a formula for conversion or salvation. In that we allow the Church to use Jesus as such a magical potion or a superstitious relic, we also, tragically, miss who he is.

The power of Jesus is that in his personhood he meets us, one on one. Christian faith is not a proposition. It is not an abstract of principles. It is not a list of moralistic dos

⁴ Anne Lamotte, *Traveling Mercies*, p.49.

⁵ This is an ongoing dispute in the Church. Did the "Constantinianization" of Christian faith strengthen Jesus' cause, by giving it world-wide appeal, or has it actually weakened the true cause of Christ, by marrying church and state?

and don'ts. Christian faith is a relationship with God, proffered by the life of one who knew our own doubts and fears, our own joys and celebrations, our own sorrows and pains. It is the example of one who walked through death with us to show us that God will do so, for us. It is the personal encounter with the very personal face of Jesus which is the heart of Christian faith, and which gives Jesus his real power.

Who do you say that I am?

There are so many ways to answer this question. In the coming weeks we want to look at Jesus, from many of these angles. The Church has called him Lord, Savior, God incarnate. Scripture knows him as teacher, healer, friend. Commentators call him liberator, iconoclast, revolutionary.

But... *Who do you say that I am?*

Perhaps you have called him Savior, but have never known the personal touch of his humanity, of his human friendship. Perhaps you have been intrigued by his personal teachings, but have never committed yourself to the extent of calling him Lord. Perhaps you have revered the example of his life, but never allowed the power of his death.

I may not literally speak his name enough times to satisfy the legalists, but I believe without reservation that when I am willing to open my life to this strange and wonderful character, this man of many names, I believe that I glimpse God anew and aright, and that in doing so, maybe for the first time, I come to know Who I Am.

May it be so.