

Who Do You Say That I Am?

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost — Proper 16

There is a familiar experience that almost all of us have had.

You look at an old photograph of yourself—maybe from ten, twenty, or thirty years ago—and for a moment you hardly recognize the person in the picture.

You say, “Was that really me?”

The face is ours, but so much has changed. And the truth is that throughout our lives, we are constantly trying to answer a very simple but very deep question:

Who am I?

We try to answer that question in many ways. We define ourselves by our family, our work, our nationality, our successes, our failures, what other people think about us, or even by the mistakes we have made.

But today, Jesus shows us another way to discover who we are. He begins with a question about himself. Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they have plenty of answers. John the Baptist. Elijah. Jeremiah. One of the prophets. In other words, everybody has an opinion about Jesus. And that is still true today.

People say Jesus was a great teacher, a prophet, a revolutionary, a moral example, a religious leader. But Jesus is not interested only in what other people say. He looks at his disciples and asks:

“But who do you say that I am?”

That question changes everything. Because Christianity is not simply knowing information about Jesus. We can know the doctrines. We can know the Creeds. We can understand the theological definitions about the humanity and divinity of Christ. All of that is important. But we can know many things about Jesus without actually knowing Jesus.

The Christian faith begins to transform us when Jesus is no longer simply someone we study, but someone we know; someone we love; someone we trust; someone we follow.

Peter answers: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And then something beautiful happens. After Peter tells Jesus who Jesus is, Jesus tells Peter who Peter is. “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.”

Peter discovers something about his own identity because he has recognized the identity of

Jesus. And I think that is at the heart of the Gospel today:

When we come to know Jesus, we begin to know ourselves.

The closer we come to Christ, the more clearly we understand who we are. We discover that we are not simply our accomplishments. We are not our failures. We are not the worst thing we have ever done. We are not simply what the world expects us to be. We are beloved children of God, called by name, given gifts, and given a purpose.

That is why Saint Paul tells us today not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. And then he speaks about our different gifts: teaching, serving, encouraging, giving, leading, showing compassion.

In Christ, we discover not only who we are, but also what we are called to become.

Peter did not understand everything that day. His faith was not perfect. In fact, if we continue reading Matthew, we discover very quickly how much Peter still had to learn.

But Peter knew the One he was following. And that relationship changed his life. The same is true for us. Jesus stands before each one of us today and asks the same question:

“Who do you say that I am?”

Not: What does the Church say?

Not: What did your parents teach you?

Not: What does the Creed say?

But: Who am I to you?

And perhaps, as we spend our lives answering that question—not only with our lips, but with our prayer, our choices, our love, and our lives—we will hear Christ answering another question deep within us:

“And now, let me show you who you are.”

Because in knowing Jesus, we discover ourselves.

And in following Jesus, we become the people God created us to be.

Amen.