Who Do You Say that I Am?

A Sermon Offered by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Mark 8:27-38 ~ September 15, 2024

One fine afternoon in June, forty-five Columbans stepped off the ferry onto the little island of Iona, off the southwest coast of Scotland. We were there because Columba – Saint Columba – had been there before us, in the 6th century, as had untold numbers of pilgrims in the centuries since. We were there because we’d heard or experienced this as a “thin place” – as the Celts say. “Thin” because the holiness of the created realm of God is evanescent; it shines forth in tangible ways. ‘Tis a veritable cathedral of earth, sea, and sky.

Traveling afar, leaving much behind, we were, in varying degrees, open, ready for discovery. As is so important in faith and discipleship, we were “on the way.” We received many invitations that week to open our hearts to different ways of experiencing Christ and the holiness of this life. Invitations came from teachers, from books and prayer, from one another, from that cathedral of earth, sea, and sky, from the depths within.

“Who do you say that I am?” “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asked of the disciples. Jesus asks me and you.

Biblical scholar Karoline Lewis cautions, “Who do you say that I am?” is a much harder question than we think it is, and it’s already hard enough. “Because, “Who do you say that I am?” is at the same time, “who will you say that you are?” If we only had to provide an answer to Jesus’ question of his identity, that would be one thing. However, answering the question of Jesus’ identity is also having to give voice to our own. Who you say Jesus is, is who you have decided to be - [or are called to be]. You cannot answer Jesus’ inquiry without revealing who you are.

Lewis continues, “Jesus’ question is not a test. It’s not about getting the answer right. [It is] the moment when you come face-to-face with your own commitment, your own discipleship, your own identity. [It is] the moment when you have to admit to what extent *how* you follow Jesus actually connects with some sort of confession of who you believe Jesus to be.”

What does this look like? The disciples with Jesus when he first asked this question had already answered in significant measure. Maybe not in words. Answered it by heeding his call, leaving their fishing nets, their families and villages. We, too, have answered. Yes, we are baptized and set forth. Yes, we gather in fellowship and church. Yes, we pray, we give, we care, we serve.

Yet none of us answer a question like this just once. Out of the blue, the question comes to us anew. We’re in the very center of the Gospel of Mark. Up to this point, the disciples have trotted along, listened to Jesus’ teaching, witnessed his healing, been amazed by the company he keeps. Now, God is about to do a new thing. From this point forward, Jesus sets off in a new direction: to Jerusalem; to suffering, persecution, death, resurrection. ‘I’ll just check in with the team,’ he thought. ‘The path ahead, may be not what you signed up for; are you with me?’ To receive your life, you must relinquish your life.

As pilgrims who were open to a Celtic lens, we were invited to see and experience God present in all of creation. Seems straightforward. Yet, with big implications. God is in the sea, in the sea otter, and the kelp; in the rain and the surf. And I? Then I am in the presence of holiness, of God, all the time, if I have eyes and heart to see. Then, I am in awe. I am called to honor creation, steward creation, with my utmost.

With the Celts, we were invited to dwell with original blessing – not original sin – at the heart of the story. That is to say: God created each of us as beloved. Yes, we sin, we fall short. And: at the start of each day, each moment, begin with blessing: I am eternally loved, good, beautiful as I am.

With the Celts, we were invited to meet Christ and consider Christianity *before* the Roman empire embraced and molded it in its own image. In a host of ways Rome layered a male-centric hierarchy upon our beliefs and practices that reach to the present day. Our posture and relationship shift when we even entertain, never mind embrace, the truth of God as mother, Christ as sister.

Returning to our shores, St. Columba’s is answering this collectively in our worship, ministries, and witness. With our 150th anniversary; where we have been; where we believe God is calling us.

It is one thing to seek Christ while on pilgrimage, or in a season of collective discernment. More often, we are brought up short; meet this question unexpectedly. In the face of death or tragedy. In the grind of injustice and oppression. In the mystery of birth and unexpected new life.

Father Gregory Boyle, who has devoted his life to ministry among gang members and returning citizens in L.A., says “the strategy of Jesus is not centered in taking the right stand on issues, but rather in standing in the right place – with the outcast and those relegated to the margins.”

In this urgent election season, candidates define themselves, define their opponents. We define our views and theirs. Who and where is God in this hour? In these circumstances? How is God inviting us into this moment? Where and with whom shall we stand, with Christ? As God weeps, comforts, nourishes the outcast and the broken-hearted, where does that place us?

Benedictine mystic Laurence Freeman calls Jesus’ question a “redemptive question” – one that “constantly refreshes our awareness that life is not fundamentally a secular problem but a sacred mystery. Mysteries are not solved. They are entered upon and they embrace us. Responding to Jesus’ question about himself and us involves not a discussion but a way of life. His disciples were first called ‘followers of the way.’” Now is the time; the hour is here.

This week, I invite you to use this question in your daily prayer. Hold it with wonder. Hold the world in your heart. Who do you say that I am?

Jesus, who do I say that you are? Who are you? For me? For us? Today?

Jesus, who do you say that *I* am? Who am I? For you? For us? Today?

Do not force the answers. Host the question. Take the next step… on the way.

Christ within us. Christ before us. Christ beneath us. Christ among us.

A prayer from Iona. From George MacLeod’s, *The Glory in the Grey*

Almighty God…

Sun behind all suns,

soul within all souls…

Show to us in everything we touch and in everyone we meet

the continued assurance of thy presence round us,

lest ever we should think thee absent.

In all created things thou art there.

In every friend we have

the sunshine of thy presence is shown forth.

In every enemy that seems to cross our path,

thou art there within the cloud

to challenge us to love.

Show to us the glory in the grey.

Awake for us thy presence in the very storm

till all our joys are seen as thee

and all our trivial tasks emerge as priestly sacraments

in the universal temple of thy love. *Amen.*