Jesus said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” (Matt.16:15)

Caesarea Philippi was one of the most worldly cities to be found in Jesus’ day. It served as an army headquarters and a large center for the worship of the Greek god Pan. It was home to a tantalizing array of enticements. A smorgasbord of activities and entertainment - physical and spiritual - to feed every possible human desire. Caesarea Philippi had the breadth of any cosmopolitan area: the presence of human virtues, learning, ingenuity and creativity, as well as baser evidence of decadence and self-indulgence. And this is the place where Jesus asks a key question of his disciples.

“Who do people say the Son of Man (the Human One) is?” Jesus asked them. “What are they saying about me out there on the streets?” I doubt it was only “religious folks” Jesus was asking about with this question. Itinerant teachers were not uncommon. So, the general public – what did they think?

The disciples eagerly report to Jesus what they’ve heard. Well, some say you’re John the Baptist, others think you’re Elijah or Jeremiah, or some other prophet.


Most of us could share a thing or two we believe about Jesus. When we celebrate the Eucharist together, most often we say the words of the Nicene Creed. The second paragraph which is the longest, spells out what the early church thought about Jesus – He was the only Son of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit became incarnate and was born of the Virgin Mary. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate. He
suffered death, was buried, and rose again.” That’s what others have said and taught about Jesus. We have said these things about Jesus, too.

But what about us – can you imagine Jesus saying to each of us, “But who do you say I am?” I wonder if at this point the disciples quickly looked down intent to study their sandals closely, or gazed far off into the distance, following the clouds’ movement in the sky. Or maybe they just stared at each other blankly.

One of them was brave enough to speak his own truth. To bare his heart and say what he believed to be true at that moment. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God”, answered Peter.

Peter is the first person in Matthew’s gospel to declare Jesus to be Messiah, the anointed one, Son of the living God. Jesus calls Peter blessed, reminding him that this recognition is not due to Peter’s superior intelligence. This is about God’s revealing God’s self through Jesus, to Peter. Peter no longer just knows about Jesus. Peter is developing a relationship with Jesus – he is beginning to know Jesus.

Though Peter bravely claims what he believes about Jesus’ identity as the Son of God, Peter only understands partially, and misunderstands a lot. In the verses of Matthew 16 which immediately follow today’s reading, Jesus tells the disciples that his ministry will lead him to Jerusalem where he will face the opposition of religious leaders, and there suffer, die, and be raised to life. He will not be the triumphant conquering Messiah they were expecting. Peter will try to tell Jesus that he is surely mistaken about this. He tries to encourage Jesus to make a course correction. Surely Jesus has not heard God’s voice clearly. Today Peter is blessed for recognizing Jesus. Next week Jesus will say to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me. Your mind is set not on divine things but on human things.” Peter has a lot to learn and unlearn as he gets to know who Jesus is and what Jesus’ life will be about.

At some point in life, when we are serious about embracing the Christian faith, we will have to answer for ourselves Jesus’ question – “Who do YOU say that I am?” If our relationship with Jesus is to become more authentic and mature, if we are to develop an authentically owned faith, we will need to ask ourselves Jesus’ question. Not once, but over and over again, because living relationships change over time.

Can you imagine Jesus asking each of us – Who am I to you? Where do I fit into your life? Does our relationship define who you are at your very core? To turn toward Jesus, and to say, for instance, Jesus is my Lord, my wisdom, my strength – this implies I am not the master or mistress of my own fate. If Jesus is my true wisdom, am I intentionally consulting God first in all my decisions, rather than coming to God for divine approval of my plans after I’ve made up my mind? If Jesus is my strength, then my fears and anxieties do not get the last word, ever. Episcopal Bishop Jake Owensby writes: “A living faith for each of us involves allowing mystery – our relationship with God – to
stretch us, to transform us, and to guide us personally.” (Episcopal Bishop Jake Owensby’s blog entry, “The Power of Love”, 8/22/20)

Commenting on this gospel passage, Karoline Lewis says: “Everybody needs to answer this question . . . Because “who do you say that I am” has everything to do with who you are willing to be. . . . (website: Working Preacher, “A Come to Jesus Moment”, 8/17/2014).

For each of us - Do we know who we are? Who we want to be? Who God wants us to be? How is this All Saints congregation right now answering Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?” There are blocks that prevent our reflecting on these important questions. We all have them - thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors that keep us from looking honestly at what our relationship with Jesus is like. Negative thoughts that impede the Spirit’s transformative work in us, both as individual disciples and as a community of faith with gifts to be used for the healing of the world. Negative thoughts that tell us we can’t change. We’re not good enough. We don’t have enough. We aren’t enough. Our gifts are too small and inconsequential. Doing church a different way will never work.

“Who do you say that I am?” We each have to answer that question for ourselves. Our answers will say as much about us as they do about Jesus. My answer? Jesus, you are God with skin on. You are the one in whom I see perfect love. You help me know that I am loved by God, and that I am called to give that love away, and not keep it for myself. You are my Lord, my wisdom, my guide. Every day of my life is about learning what this means for who I am, and how I live in this world.