

It was one of our first assignments in the Philippines. We were to share a Bible study at a teen youth camp. We arrived eager and ready to go. We found our assigned place, the stage, and discovered it was set-up like a school room – desks, set in rows. We re-arranged the room putting the desks in a circle and waited. As soon as the teens began arriving they started putting the desks back in school room fashion – they thought someone had made a mistake. Once we sorted this out and got them seated in an uncomfortable circle (for them) they took out their notebooks and pens/pencils, opened them and waited for us to start “telling them what to think.” They were like little birds, mouths open, waiting to be fed. After reading the assigned Scripture we asked, “What do you think this means?” Absolute silence. No one responded. Finally one brave soul remarked, “You are supposed to tell us what this means.” They were not prepared when we responded, “But we want to know what you think first.” More silence. The Peter of the group – our one brave soul spoke again, “We haven’t been taught how to do that.”

The simple question of Jesus to the disciples as they travel to Caesarea Philippi is, “Who do people say I am?” Now this is an easy question. Jesus wants to know what his disciples are hearing in the market place, the synagogue, those places where people gather and talk. There is no danger in repeating what you hear on the street. After all this is what the people are saying. All the disciples have to do is repeat what they have heard at the barber shop, etc.

This is what our young Filipino students waited for. They wanted us to tell them what we thought. They would easily repeat back what we thought. It became more difficult when we asked, “What do you think?”

After the disciples answer this easy question of Jesus he asks another. A more difficult one, “Who do you say I am?” They are on the spot now. Jesus is asking how they respond when they hear people say he is John the Baptist come back to life or Elijah. Jesus wants to know what they say, what they think. How do they respond to such statements.

It is much easier to comment on what we hear. What others are saying. I remember listening to a sermon a few years ago. The speaker filled his message with quotes from dead theologians. He had very well researched the topic and was very up on what the theologians of the past thought and presented it very well. However he never did say what he believed? I left the service knowing what dead theologians thought of the Scripture passage but no hint of his thinking.

As they walk along the road Jesus asks them, “Who do YOU say I am?” To paraphrase Jesus, “Now is the time for you to tell me what you think.” He gets the same response we got from our Filipino students, silence. Then, when he can probably not tolerate the silence any longer, Peter responds, “You are the Messiah.” We/I believe you are the promised One from God. Can you hear the sigh of relief? Peter has spoken and in speaking he has taken them off the hook. I imagine most of them nod in agreement. Yes, Peter has said it.

The moments that follow are a “teaching” moment. Jesus shares with them what Messiah means. He uses words they are not prepared to hear. Words they do not associate with Messiah: rejection, death and resurrection. The journey before them is not the journey they had anticipated. Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him.

These are not the words of a Messiah. This is not the Messiah they had envisioned. This is not the language of a Messiah. Peter is concerned that Jesus will scare everyone away. We have been taught what to expect of the Messiah and this is not what we have been taught.

At some point the question of Jesus to the disciples becomes Jesus' question to us: "Who do you say I am?" It is not longer what our parent, grandparent, Sunday School teacher, youth group leader or pastor says about Jesus. We may be able to repeat what they say. We may have their answers firmly imbedded in our minds. It is easy to repeat what they have taught us. We have learned our lessons well. But that is not the question Jesus asks. It is not the time when we have to answer the question for ourselves. It is not what others say, "Who do YOU say I am?"

My response to this question is, "It all depends." My CPE students in the Philippines reminded me in a book they gave me in thanks for mentoring them, how often I used that phrase in our sessions together. I recall being in a gathering where we had to introduce ourselves and tell our favorite hymn. My response, "It all depends." It may be the last hymn I have heard. It may be a hymn that is dictated by my mood at the time. I don't have any all time favorite – it shifts along with my needs. For me this is the same as defining who Jesus is.

To the hungry he is the Bread of Life.

To the sick he is the Great Physician

To the lonely he is the one who comes and sits beside, often in silence.

To the lost he is the Good Shepherd who goes out seeking his lost sheep.

To the Prodigals he is the parent waiting at home, watching – ready to throw a party in celebration of the return home.

To the anxious he is peace.

To the proud he is One who comes and makes us humble.

To the happy he is the One who enjoys our celebrations and parties.

It all depends on the need of the One standing before him. He is able to meet all our needs. Peter was right. Jesus is Messiah – he is all that Messiah means and more than we have imagined. He is Messiah in every aspect of our thoughts and being. He is more than we think or imagine.

There is no wrong answer to this question of Jesus. It is your answer and your answer at the moment. God comes to meet our needs. God becomes that which we need at the moment. The response of God to who God is is simple: I am. There can be no statement greater than that. God is who God is. God is the one who knows you and even in knowing us loves us.

Who do you say he is? There is no question that impacts on us greater than this one. It was not asked to put the disciples on the spot. It was asked in order for them to respond from the depth of their hearts. It is not asked today to put you on the spot. It is asked because Jesus asked it: "Who do you say I am?" Who do you say He is?

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Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quoted is from NRSV, NCCC/USA 1989