



After she retired, my Mother used to watch the TV show “Are you smarter than a 5th grader”? She taught kindergarten for about 30 years. She had watched our educational system change significantly in its emphases over that time- including, but not limited to, the ethnic makeup of students as immigrants and refugees found Southern California to be their resting place. She also saw significant changes in how parents spent time with their children over things like reading at home. She saw lots of changes in the administrative parts of her job and budget cuts and on and on and on. She finally decided to quit when she felt that she was

no longer spending most of her time teaching- the other parts of her job had crowded out what she felt was her primary job.

So the show “Are you smarter than a 5th grader” was a humorous way to spend a half-hour appreciating how often the kids knew the answers that the adult did not. For me, it was frequently “huh, I don’t recall learning that.” Sometimes we adults make things much more complicated than they need to be. We let the other aspects of our lives get in the way of answering a simple question.

Today’s gospel asks one of the most important questions of all: “who do you say that I am?” Google Images is one of my new favorites and you will see an image accompanying the sermon when it is posted on our website (thank you to Will for posting the sermons so those who were not here can home a sense of what we considered on a Sunday). I’ve posted around the church a few images of who we might say Jesus is for us to consider this morning. Maybe one of these images resonates with you. Maybe none of them do. Or maybe this one today and that image tomorrow. Each of us has to answer this question for ourselves. My answer is not likely to be your answer. And one of the interesting things I learned when I was searching for images of Jesus is what images I was leaving out – but that’s a sermon for another day!

As you consider the various images- and those that are not posted today but are helpful to you, consider this:

How you ever had the experience of getting all the answers right –
you’re feeling pretty proud of yourself –
and then you get one wrong –
in front of everybody?

Don’t you wish you could just slink away and hide? The fact that you knew all those other answers makes the fact that you blew this question even worse. Everybody’s looking at you. Maybe they’re even laughing at you.

In the reading from the gospel of Mark today, we see something like that TV show. Jesus asks his disciples, “who do people say that I am?” And they answer him:

John the Baptist (wrong);
Elijah (wrong again);
one of the prophets (wrong a third time –buzzz, you’re out).

Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3: 1-12; Mark 8:27-38

Don't you think Jesus was pretty upset at this point? After all, the disciples had been traveling with him, watching him heal people. Watching him feed many, many more people than they had food for – doing all these miracles, healing all those people, talking and teaching and **still** people couldn't say who Jesus really was.

So, Jesus asks the disciples again, but this time the question is “who do **you** say that I am?” Not the crowd – not the others- but those who had been with Jesus and so had the best opportunity to figure this out. No more hiding – they had to answer for themselves.

And Peter gets it right: “You are the Messiah.” I can just see Peter smiling – and maybe the other disciples thinking “teacher's pet.”

Messiah: God's anointed. God's chosen one. Jesus sent to earth to help us know God in human form. To see how to live, how to care for each other, how to love one another. So Peter's probably feeling pretty good right about now. After all, he got the answer right. Peter's on top of the heap.

Now that the disciples know that Jesus is God's anointed one, the Messiah, they think life is going to get better. They are going to be the ones who get special privileges and live lives of leisure with everything they ever wanted or needed at their fingertips. Sounds pretty good, doesn't it?

But that's not what Jesus has come to do or to be. Jesus goes on to tell the disciples what is going to happen. There will be suffering and death. Yes, Jesus will rise again in three days, but first comes suffering and rejection. Now why would God's anointed one have to suffer? This doesn't make any sense to the disciples. They think Jesus has come to rule the world – and he has, but not as an earthly king.

The people of Israel, God's chosen people, though, thought that the Messiah would be a ruler on earth. So Peter, the teacher's pet, the one who so often seems to get it right, says to Jesus: “no, you're wrong. You need to be a king here on earth.”

And Jesus turns to Peter and calls him the worst thing ever: “Get behind me Satan.” Don't you imagine Peter is just stunned? His friend, his Lord, has just told him he is wrong- and not only wrong, but really, really wrong.

From the high of being the first to say who Jesus really is – the son of God – to being told by Jesus that he is Satan. How can this be? Does Jesus turn his back on Peter because Peter got it wrong?

No, and that's the wonderful message of our life with Jesus. We can be right one minute and **really** wrong the next. But Jesus doesn't send us away. Jesus doesn't tell us he doesn't want to be our friend any more. Jesus doesn't make us stand in front of everybody and say “we not smarter than a 5th grader.”

Jesus takes us back whenever we mess up. Jesus loves us no matter what we do. Jesus hopes we will recognize who he is and what he has to offer us, even if it takes us a long time to figure it out.

Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3: 1-12; Mark 8:27-38

Remember that Peter was the one who attempted to walk on water because Jesus called to him to step out of the boat and walk to Jesus. But then he became afraid – he remembered all he knew from life before Jesus. That life didn't include walking on water. Peter took his focus off of Jesus and Peter began to sink. But Jesus pulled him up and out – and Peter was safe once more. Peter was the one who wanted to build three booths on the Mount of Transfiguration. He wanted to please Jesus by honoring him along with Moses and Elijah- the two great prophets of Israel. But then Peter learned that Jesus was more than Moses and Elijah – Jesus was more than a prophet. He was, in fact, very God of very God.

We are often just like Peter. We try hard but we so often goof up. We speak before we think. We act without all the facts. We don't mean to hurt others but we do. Peter, sometimes so right and sometimes so very wrong.

Peter can be our model for how to try, and how to live through those times when we get it wrong. Jesus waits for us with love and open arms. Jesus uses us – our gifts and talents to bring about the realm of God on earth – when we're ready and willing to offer those gifts to God.

Peter becomes the rock upon which the institutional church begins. So even Peter who once was called Satan because he really, really got it wrong, can turn back to Jesus and be used by God for good.

Peter, who denied Jesus three times before the cock crowed, later becomes one of the leaders in the early church, helping to spread the good news of Jesus Christ throughout the ancient world.

We are like Peter. We sometimes get it right. We sometimes get it wrong. Your image and your answer to the question “who do you say that I am” may be different from mine.

But God loves each of us anyway. If we will let it, the love of God for us can transform us. It doesn't matter if every image posted in the church today is how you understand Jesus. Or if none of them do. It doesn't matter if we are – or we are not – smarter than a 5th grader. God loves us just as we are.

The first question is “Who do you say that I am?” The second question, one to be pondered in your heart, is “so what?” Now that you have considered who Jesus is to you, it's time to ask the second question: “so what?” The images may suggest to you about how Jesus faced the world. The images – these and others in your head- inform how we are to respond to the world once we have answered the question of who Jesus is to us. This is not a pop quiz. This is not a one-time answer. This is a question – and a response- that will take a lifetime. And we don't have to get 100% right.

(Pass out image) I have asked my compatriots to pass out to you an image that *The New Yorker* included in one of its issues that helps me with the “so what” part of “who is Jesus to me”. I ask that you consider it before we continue. It took me awhile to figure it out- so don't feel badly if you don't get the message.
(pause)

If we say that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, and that he shows us how to live, and if we say that Scripture is inspired by God for our learning and our discerning, then we need to see the face of Jesus in every human being. When I can see Jesus in you, and you can see Jesus in me, then we have the chance to respect the dignity and worth of each other. We have some firm ground on which to structure our life.

My friend Carol Mead, Rector of a St. Peter's by the Lake in Brandon, Mississippi, writes:

On an unfamiliar back road, I passed two signs, positioned right together. One identified the street as "Covenant Road," and the other sign said, "Dead end."

For some reason, the ideas of "covenant" and "law" seem to many modern-day people to be dead ends. Perhaps they see such terms as rigid, failing to allow for the grace of God. So people--even good and godly people--resist the idea of following God's law because they believe in a life of grace.

But "law" and "covenant" have no value in themselves. They are valuable to God's people because they give us a framework for living together in community and for learning to love other human beings. We find, in any moment in which we choose to love another, "the salvation of God." We do not earn that salvation, winning points for obeying rules. We simply access that salvation, here as well as in the hereafter, by living out the eternal way of love for God and one another.

We modern-day seekers need to stop bristling at the ideas of law and covenant as rigid, meaningless rules. "Covenant Road" is not, as it turns out, a dead end. It is actually the short-cut to eternity.¹

Once we decide who Jesus is and what it means to us we need to act in ways consistent with that understanding and belief. One of the glories of "being church" is that we get to walk this journey- and have these conversations, **together. We do not have to do this alone.** We are often like Peter- Jesus calls us to walk on water. We start out ok and then we get distracted, or we think about what the world tells us, or And the hand of Jesus reaches out again- "come to me" – and we are safe. The sign "Dead End" does not have to be the result when we follow "Covenant Road" even when the signs are placed side-by-side. And that is good news, indeed. *Thanks be to God. Amen.*

¹ Carol Mead, Sept 10, 2015. www.holyordinary.com