

Sermon
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 27th, 2023
Church of the Ascension, Ottawa
The Reverend Victoria Scott
Readings: EXODUS 1:8-2:10; PSALM 124; ROMANS 12:1-8; MATTHEW
16:13-20

Who am I? Who are you? Who are we together?
In his book "Naked Spirituality", Brian McLaren offers these questions as a way into prayer and meditation. He suggests that God is asking us these questions, and that we are invited to ask God the same questions.

These questions whisper to us in our readings this morning. Jack will be baptized today: these questions are at the heart of this sacrament. We are invited to weave these questions through the living out of our Christian faith.

Who am I? Who are you? Who are we together?

In the Gospel passage we've just heard, Jesus asks the disciples "Who do you say that I am?" This passage is often referred to as the Confession of Peter, and it is, because he's the only one who answered! Jesus wasn't just asking Peter the question, though, it was to all the disciples, and we are all invited to hear Jesus asking us this: Who do you say that I am?

There are layers to the question "Who do you say that I am?" in this passage. It's not just "Who am I?" It's not just who is Jesus in a detached, objective way. "Who are you?" whispers in this too, as Jesus wants to know who he is and what he means not in a generalized way, but rather in relation to Peter. Who Peter was mattered, who Peter was together with Jesus mattered. Who we are, and who we are together with Jesus matters.

Peter answers "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". Jesus affirms this, and the next thing Jesus does is to explain who Peter is – he answers the question "Who are you?" for Peter as he says: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...". Jesus answers the

question “Who are we together?” for Peter. He says to Peter – and he says to us – “Together we are the Church.”

Last week, I talked about the kind of God we believe in. What kind of Messiah is Jesus? What kind of God does Jesus reveal to us? This ripples through the living out of our faith. It impacts the way we are with each other and in the world, and it makes all the difference in the kind of Church we build...

Peter doesn't actually get it right with his confession that Jesus is the Messiah, because what Messiah was for him wasn't the same thing it was for Jesus. For Peter, Messiah meant a confrontation, a power struggle, and victory for Jesus and for them by association.

This isn't the kind of God that Jesus revealed. This isn't the kind of Messiah that Jesus was. We, on this side of the Resurrection, know how the story unfolded. It wasn't confrontation, power and the kind of victory Peter and the disciples were expecting. For Jesus, Messiah meant suffering, and it meant trusting that God would work through that suffering for the sake of all of creation: for everyone, and everything. And God did work through that suffering, God showed us that death does not have the last word: love does!

This is what Messiah means for us. It means that love is stronger than death, stronger than anything. Jesus, the Messiah, reveals a God of love to us. Messiah means that we are loved beyond measure. It means that God chose to stay in relationship with us, no matter what. It means that we are never alone because Jesus went ahead of us, through the suffering, through death, and he is with us always in the Resurrection.

This is what we are following when we recognize Jesus as the Messiah and commit to his way!

As followers of Jesus, we are all small pebbles – pieces of the rock – like Peter, and together we are the Church. This is all about relationship and connection. Stones don't always stay together in a neat pile. Some are rough, some are smooth, they slip and slide and tumble. They need to be shifted, tilted, moved. The questions “Who am I? Who are you? Who are we together?” invite us to do that shifting and moving as “living stones”! We

shift and move things in ourselves, and we shift and move things together in community.

There are stones of injustice and oppression in our world: the way of Jesus calls us to shift those stones. There are opportunities to pile stones of love and solidarity alongside the vulnerable and marginalized. I'll march in the Pride Parade along with others from Ascension and from parishes across our Diocese. I do this to shift the stones that oppress and marginalize, and to lay down stones of love and solidarity with our 2SLGBTQIA+siblings.

The questions "Who am I? Who are you? Who are we together?" remind us that we are following Jesus. They remind us that God is with us, and that we are with each other, and that we are invited to be with each other with love, with compassion, with peace and justice, as we build the church, and indeed in everything we do.

The questions "Who am I? Who are you? Who are we together?" invite us into larger reality than our own self-interest.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu spoke about authentic self-centeredness as "Ubuntu": "I am because of who you are". We are invited to say this to God, and to one another, and to all of creation.

Desmond Tutu said this:

"Ubuntu is the essence of being human. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality – Ubuntu – you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity." (Archbishop Desmond Tutu)

This is at the heart of the Gospel, and at the heart of following Jesus! The statement "I am because you are" has the questions "Who am I? Who are you? Who are we together?" woven through it.

In a few moments, Jack will be baptized. He will recognize Jesus as the Messiah – a Messiah who shows him that he is loved, and that he is to be love in the world. He'll commit to following the way that Jesus shows us and we'll renew our commitment to the way of Jesus alongside him. It's a way of connection. A way of "Ubuntu". A way that shifts stones and builds Church and community in the name of compassion, peace, justice and love.

Who am I? Who are you? Who are we together? May you feel God's answer, and our answer in this place this morning. Feel it in the sacrament of Baptism, and in the Eucharist. Feel it in our prayer and singing. God is love, and so are we. And love is what we are called to be together. In Jesus name. Amen.