

## WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

A sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno on September 12, 2021  
Based on Mark 8:27-38

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Who was Jesus? A grand debate has been going on over that question for close to 2000 years. According to the story appointed for this morning from *The Gospel of Mark*, even Jesus wanted to know what people thought of him, and what he most wanted to know was what those he loved thought of him.

Actually, Matthew's gospel contains the most well known version of this story: Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am?"

"John the Baptist," said one. "Elijah," said another. Still another said, "One of the prophets."

Then Jesus said, "But who do YOU say that I am?"

And Peter, never shy, responds: "You're the messiah, the son of the living God."  
And Jesus says, "Here are the keys to the kingdom; you're now the first Pope."

Not so in the gospel of Mark; Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He says he's going to die there on a Roman cross. Peter is scandalized – he rebukes Jesus. Jesus rebukes him back calling him Satan and saying his thoughts are too human; not a bit divine. Peter sees Jesus, but he sees him imperfectly.

The story that comes right before this in this morning's version of the story is revealing in this regard. It tells of a man who is healed by Jesus of his blindness, but when he offers a report of what he can see, he says he can see people now, but they look to him like "trees . . . walking" -- and then he receives a second touch from Jesus in order to see properly.

This is Mark's highly literary way of communicating the problem of Jesus. When Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am," it reveals that, when it comes to the things of God, we, all of us, understand incompletely.

I adore the version of today's text that survives in the *Apocryphal Gospel of Thomas* which is NOT in our Bible. Jesus asks his disciples to tell him what he is like.

Simon Peter answers, "You are like a just messenger."

Matthew says, "You are like a wise philosopher."

Finally, the disciple named, Thomas goes home with the gold star when he answers, "Rabbi, my mouth is utterly unable to say what you are like."

It is very curious that we have built an entire religion around a person whom even those who knew and followed did not understand. How are we supposed to answer this question for ourselves when even the biblical authors can't agree?

As with individual Christians, the Christian church is not in total agreement about who Jesus is. With every new century, and with every new culture to which the Gospel is introduced, we hear differing interpretations.

As Albert Schweitzer said over a hundred years ago, "Each successive epoch has found its own thoughts in Jesus' thoughts, which was, indeed, the only way in which it could make him live."

Today we have a goodly number of differing interpretations of Jesus, since people still tend to take for granted that Jesus thinks like they do.

There's Therapist Jesus –very popular today -- he helps us cope with life's problems, and love our inner-child. He tells us how valuable we are and not to be so hard on ourselves.

There's Starbucks Jesus who drinks fair trade coffee, drives an electric car and until recently, went to film festivals.

There's Open-minded Jesus who loves everyone all the time no matter what, except for people who are **not** open-minded who he would hate if he could, but -- he's Jesus.

There's Touchdown Jesus who helps athletes that we like run faster and jump higher than athletes we don't like. "Thank you Jesus."

There's January 6th Jesus who still thinks the election was stolen.

And socialist Jesus who wishes Bernie was president.

There is Sustainability Jesus who never misses an opportunity to say, loudly, "I told you so" about Global Warming, and can't wait for the state of Florida to be completely under water.

There's Spirituality Jesus who hates religion, churches, pastors, priests, and creeds; and would rather have people out in nature, finding the god within.

Finally, there is *Hello Kitty* Jesus, which is . . . just wrong.

Seen through the highly materialistic culture of the last 35 years, Jesus has come to be a materialist too.

A few years back I heard a woman on a Christian radio talk show say that she wanted a new car and prayed and behold, she traded up to a fancy two-seater Lexus.

"Isn't God good??" she said, and the radio minister agreed.

Hmm? Half the population of the planet lives on less than two dollars a day and God wanted more than anything to give her a Lexus. Don't get me wrong, here -- I think people should be free to do whatever they want with their money ... but really?

Let's take one more look at Open-minded Jesus, since that's the one I tend to like.

Some years ago I drove an old red square Volvo with the bumper sticker that said, "Presbyterians: Open-minded -- Openhearted."

Soon after, the Methodists stole that and made it the center-piece of a national television campaign. Those Methodists. They have no shame.

Anyway, Tolerance is very important - but look, tolerance can run amuck if it's a tolerance that believes that *every* idea is as meaningful as every other.

You know, it's not enough to say, "I believe in God."

People hate in the name of the God they believe in. They killed thousands of Americans 20 years ago yesterday in the name of God. People legitimize their prejudices in the name of God. Jesus had no use for this. He bet his life that God **was not** someone who would ask people to hate or kill in God's name – just the opposite.

There is just some kind of truth that is positively deep and abiding that happened when, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, a Palestinian peasant named, "Yeshua," chose to hang out with women who were not in his family; talk to them; hear them out; invite them to follow him. It was "saving." It saved them from being only half of what they were meant to be.

A lot of people who believe in God don't agree with that; don't agree that women should be considered first class human beings. But Jesus did.

And look, Jesus was just warming up. He trumped even that when he chose to invite children, boy *and* girl children, to climb up into his lap and ask him questions and bless their little heads, like they were real people. Because in the first century a parent might not even choose to name a child until its five or six. They weren't hardly considered human. By honoring women and children Jesus was literally 2000 years ahead of his time.

When you think about it, it is phenomenal. His example is unprecedented in history; it's a "God" thing like no other God thing I know... which is why I chose to become a minister.

"Do you want to know what God is like?" asks Jesus. "God does things like bless little children." Brothers and sisters, I believe that with everything in me. More on that next week.

Tolerance is crucial in a free society, but it is also true that tolerance can be an excuse people use to keep from making commitments.

Let me tell you what I mean.

People say, (quote) "I like to read Wendell Berry and Alan Watts, and I'm drawn to Eastern Religions. Well, I'm not so drawn that I really study them. After all, we all have the same God."

Well, I wonder. Do we?? I'm a Protestant Christian just like the woman on the Christian radio talk show who's God enabled her to trade up to the Lexus, but I'm not at all sure we're, you know, in-tune on the subject of God, or what God wants for the world.

T.S. Eliot took an advanced degree at Harvard University in the early part of the last century in Sanskrit and Eastern Religion. A couple of years later he gave it up before the dissertation. Why? Because, he said, our western culture is Judeo Christian. Our laws, our values, our literature, our music, all come from that ethos. We live in that culture like fish live in the ocean.

He said that life is just not long enough for a Westerner to adequately absorb the ethos of the east. That may or may not be true. I don't know. The fact is, though, that Eliot made a conscious choice to make peace with the fact of his birth and became an Anglican Christian.

I asked Huston Smith, the great teacher of the world's religions, about this 25 years ago over breakfast. He agreed with Eliot saying it was part of the reason he himself made a choice and embraced Christianity in his later years. He became . . . a Methodist. Hmm?

What I am saying is that we can be committed to something without being narrow. That takes some courage.

A dear member of a church I once served in Ashland told me that she was at a party one Saturday night. It got to be 11:00pm. She said, "Oh I've got to get home. I've got to get up early and teach Sunday school tomorrow morning.

She said that from the reaction she got she might as well have said,  
"I've got to go to the moon in the morning."

Some of my colleagues in other churches find this state of affairs depressing – the fact that Christianity is looked down upon. Well, I get that, but I find this to be the most exciting time to do what I'm doing – to be a progressive Christian who follows the Jesus who supported women and children like almost no one before him.

In the 1950s and 60s people crowded into churches, you know. People went to church whether it had anything to offer them or not. It was the thing to do. But this is a time when all the old props are gone.

I know that when you come here (or tune-in to Southminster) on a morning like this it is a real choice you're making. I know that you could be doing a thousand other things. You don't come here for the same reasons people did 40 years ago.

You didn't come here this morning to get ahead in your job, or because three generations of your family sat in the pew you're sitting in. Maybe, but probably not.

What an amazing time it is to be a Christian, when everybody isn't one. It's so much more interesting.

Tolerance is wonderful. We can't survive without it, but it should never be an excuse for *not* settling in somewhere. For *not* making a choice. For not saying, I belong here.

A man named Sam Keen once wrote a book called, TO A DANCING GOD. In a chapter entitled, "Learning to Make Vows," he wrote: "Making a [commitment to something or somebody] is a dangerous thing, but so is never making any [commitments] at all."

We all know people who can't make commitments because, they say, "what if it isn't the complete truth? What if somebody else might be right?"

Someone I know had an answer for that: He said, "I never thought that I had to prove I loved my wife by hating other women." (Krister Stendah).

"Who do you say that I am?" Might this be time for you to consider that question?

The thing in this text that grabs me is that Jesus isn't content to know what the prevailing idea of the day about him is. He wants to know what Peter and John think of him. And maybe even you and me.

"Who do YOU say that I am?"

Franz Kafka was once interviewed. The text of that interview appeared after his death in *Partisan Review* in 1953. The interviewer asked Kafka the question Peter answered in today's bit of scripture – "Who is Jesus for you?"

Kafka, a Jew, answered this way, and it is my favorite definition for Jesus I have ever heard: "He is an abyss filled with light. One must close one's eyes if one is not to fall into it."

There is just something about him that tends to get under your skin; whether you like it or not. Do you know what I mean?

In 1959 I was a kid in a fourth grade Missouri Synod Lutheran Vacation Church School program in Sacramento. I don't remember much about the experience except one thing. Every morning they showed us a few minutes of a low budget 16mm film about the life of Jesus.

And what I remember from that was only one story. The story of a woman taken in the act of something the authority figures in the film deemed unspeakable.

They threw her down in front of Jesus and demanded he judge her, but he would not. He simply said, “Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.”

I heard that and I was hooked for life. Ever since then I thought that **there** is the measure of wisdom, and the truest example of love I have ever seen.

I had no idea then how profound an effect that was going to have on my life. But I suppose I’m here today because when I was 10 they showed us that movie.

He gets under our skin and he won’t let us go. Maybe you’ve had that experience yourself at some point in your life. Maybe yes, maybe no.

“An abyss filled with light” who maybe won’t let you go.

I want to close with a moving example of that which comes right out of the life of the writer, Anne Lamott, -- decades ago when the bottom had fallen out of her life; when she was physically sick, drinking too much, using too many drugs, out of ideas, she was lying on her bed feeling miserable. She thought of herself as a lost cause.

But weeks before this she had begun hanging out on Sunday mornings outside a little church I myself was drawn to a year before that in Marin City, California – a small struggling Presbyterian congregation with a wonderful woman pastor.

The church was made up of a rainbow of lovely people – a cross section of the whole earth. Anne had not gathered up the courage necessary to actually go into the church. She had spent her time at the door, just taking it all in, feeling that she, an intellectual, an accomplished novelist would rather die than be known as a Christian. So, while she couldn’t go inside, she couldn’t quite stay away, either.

Anyway, she’s laying there on her bed, feeling totally wiped out from a life-style that just isn’t working for her anymore. And ...

. . . “As I lay there,” she writes, “I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner . . . The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light to make sure no one was there, and of course there wasn’t. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this. Just sitting there on his haunches, in the corner of my sleeping loft, watching me with infinite patience and love.” (*Traveling Mercies*, p. 49-50).

Amen