

Romans 12:1-8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Matthew 16:13-20

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Matthew 16:13-20, August 24, 2008, A

I don't know if you have noticed that I end many of my articles for the Trumpet, and on other material, with this verse from Romans 12:2:

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect.

I love that passage.

Don't be conformed to this world. Don't be shaped by this world, or live in the pattern of this world

But be transformed.

The Greek word is metamorphosmai.

Go through a metamorphosis and like a caterpillar be changed into a beautiful butterfly; what a dramatic change that is.

But be transformed how?

By the renewing of your minds;

by allowing the word and power of God to change how you think about your world and life, how you think about other people, how you view relationships with others.

Allow the presence and power of God to transform how you think about being a follower of Christ; maybe even change not just how you think about it, but how you live your life as a Christ-follower.

Do you remember the story from last week about the non-Christian drummer hired to play in the praise band at the church? After a year he told his wife,

“I think I have become one of those Christ-follower people.”

These passages for today speak to that issue.

You know I got to thinking about it and one of the issues I have about much of the new thinking, writing and talking about church and faith life in this new era we live in is that they still use church language.

The word “disciple” is one of my pet peeves. How is that word understood today that helps people get the life that is inferred for us who have been in the church at least a significant amount of our lives.

We may get what it means to be a disciple, but how does it help those who haven’t grown up in the church

I wonder if I didn’t happen on a good substitute for that word “disciple” with “Christ-follower.”

Isn’t Christ-follower more descriptive of the life of someone who reflects the life of Christ in this day and time as opposed to any other whim or fad?

Does that give you some better imagery to work with?

Paul tells the people of Rome that there is a purpose in this transformation they are called to. That purpose is,

so that you may discern what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and perfect.

And then not only know it, but live it using the gifts that God has given them;

prophecy, to minister, teach; encourage, give in generosity; to lead diligently, to show compassion in cheerfulness.

But it all begins with discernment and Jesus shows us this in His conversation with the disciples, and the discernment he leads the disciples and us into is a matter of great importance because it is about that question:

“Who do you say that I am?”

Among the people the disciples had encountered there were a number of opinions; everything from John the Baptist to one of the ancient prophets of Israel.

Peter, as he always does speaks right up and this time gives the text book answer:

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Now to begin with these are very interesting questions for Jesus to ask:

Who do people say that I am?

Who do you say that I am?

According to some Social-Science scholars who have studied the gospel stories, the people of Jesus day were “Other oriented,” meaning that their identity was derived from the answers to these two questions.

Understanding of one’s self came through the eyes of significant others in a person’s life and community.

They would not ask the question “Who am I?” and then conclude who they were through self-reflection and determination the way we do these days.

What **they** say is who I am.

So Jesus asks the questions.

First lets deal briefly with the answer to those questions assuming that we as a faith community have asked them of some who are outside this church.

We might ask if these are valid questions to be asking those people, and maybe they are and maybe they aren't depending on what you believe about why we even exist as a community of faith.

If you determined that this is a social or country club with its primary concern on ourselves;

our own needs, sense of belonging, comfort, then you may be able to conclude that these are not relevant questions.

However, if you believe that we are to be concerned about our community and the world then perhaps these are very appropriate questions to ask those in the community we are called to serve.

It is then truly their opinion that we need to be concerned with, for how can you serve a community that finds you to be unfriendly, uncaring, selfish, self-centered?

Just as an example, and I am not saying this is the case here, there are many congregations that claim to be friendly. They have decided they are.

But if you ask anyone who has visited the church they will tell you the exact opposite.

One pastor tells the story of how at a council meeting some of the members were proudly talking about how friendly their congregation was. There was a fairly new member on the council and so the pastor asked, “Do you find us to be friendly?”

The man said “No!”

The faces of the others suddenly were not so proud and not so certain.

I have always believed that it is those who are out in the community who we need to ask what we are known for.

Hopefully we will always hear good things but that is unlikely.

In addition to our corporate or communal image I want you to give some thought to these two questions as if it were you sitting there with Jesus and He asked you,

“Who do you say that I am?”

Who do you say that Jesus is?

Or do you say?

Do you tell others who Jesus is?

Do you have a clear enough understanding about who Jesus is to you that you can share it with someone else?

In the gospel of Matthew prior to this passage you hear a half-a-dozen times that Jesus is the Messiah.

All of these declarations are made by the narrator of the gospel story. This is the first time the disciples, the Christ-followers have made this confession,

“You are the Messiah!”

They have spent some time with Jesus, heard him teach, preach, tell parables, heal the sick, cast out demons, raise the dead.

Even with all that back-story Jesus says, Peter, you didn't come by this on your own, but it was revealed to you by my Father in heaven.

It is a gift to you from God.

So, what about you?

What is your story? And it is a story.

I know that most of you know the Apostle's Creed by heart and that is one way of saying who Jesus is.

In the church we come up with titles and creeds and other formulations that all fall short of a full description of Jesus.

But I want to know how you answer that question with your lives, with your relationships, with your time, your energy, your bank accounts, and everything else God has given you.

What do you mean when you say that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, Lord, your personal Lord and savior.

I really want you to think about that. Discern what is good, acceptable and perfect, and live it.

I couldn't ask you to do that without having done it myself of course, and so I worked at answering the question,

“Who do you say that I am?”

As I began my own memories of my encounters with Jesus, with His truth, began to wash over me.

There was the time I remember when I was about 13 or 14, sitting in the balcony of the church on Sunday morning with my family and beginning to cry during the sermon.

I believe it was out of loneliness, and hurt, and the belief that there was no way God could love me.

My next memory is more than 20 years later on a Via de Cristo weekend retreat and learning that Jesus had made me worthy of God's love through His suffering, death and resurrection.

He did it for me!

God did love me and for the first time I believed it!

Other memories of Jesus' presence during some of the most difficult of times and in the greatest celebrations rolled through my mind, sometimes like a video.

There were times of suffering, times of sorrow and loss, times of failure, disappointment and betrayal, times when He cried my tears,

Then in times of healing, learning, accomplishment,
in courtship and premarital counseling,
reconciled relationships, the birth of children,
discerning call to ministry,
graduation and ordination and continuing
vocation Jesus was there.

There was the occasion of God taking over role a father.

Jesus, for me is the presence of God in this world and this life that I live; the presence of a God who is big enough and awesome enough to handle whatever comes in this lifetime.

Jesus is the presence in this world of the one true God who fills me with His love, grace, His Holy Spirit, for the purpose of sustaining me and providing for me in every aspect of my life,
Who forgives all my sins and calls me to serve.

He reveals the heart of our God who doesn't give in to disease but comes to heal,
who doesn't give in to starvation but comes to feed,
who doesn't give in to defeat but comes to cast out demons and defeat evil and death.

Jesus is also the one who reveals God's heart for the world; a heart that gets angry and upset when a young black man is shot for no discernible reason.

- whose heart aches for those who are depressed and who contemplate taking their own life,
- whose heart is grieved when the land we call Holy is torn by violence and hatred, when the terrors of war ravage any of His people.

Jesus reveals to us the heart of a God who invites us to the same.

I know that this description falls as short as any you may find, but who Jesus is gets described in your relationship with Him, in the ways in which He has touched your life.

Jesus invites you to answer the same question,

“Who do you say that He is?”

Not for His sake, but for your own.