

21st Sunday of Ordinary Time, A, Matthew 16:13-20

“But who do you say that I am?”

Let me tell you some of the answers I have heard or read. My personal Lord and Savior. The Son of God. God incarnate. He is my life, the song I sing, my everything. Buddy, brother, friend, homeboy. Rock, comforter, coach. Teacher. Example. The copilot next to me. The list could go on and on.

At some point or another, we have probably all been told who Jesus is. Maybe you heard it from priests, teachers, parents, friends, or prayer groups. Maybe you read it in books, Sunday school lessons, or on bumper stickers. Maybe you saw it on Facebook, read it on the internet, or heard it in a song. Some of the answers may have been helpful. Some were not. Some were just plain silly, and others were hurtful and destructive. Regardless, the question remains.

I don't intend to answer that question for you. I cannot. Each of us must answer it for ourselves. It is not, however, a theology or Bible exam. If anything, it is an examination of our own lives.

I don't think Jesus is asking us to just echo the answers we have heard or read. Maybe that is why he pushes the disciples to move from what they are hearing around them – John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets – to what they are hearing within themselves. **“But who do you say that I am?”**

This is not an easy question. I wonder if we sometimes too readily accept and settle for “**Sunday Jesus**” answers. You know, the easy, feel-good, sentimental ones. The problem is life is not always easy, feel good, or sentimental. It is one thing to say who Jesus is here in Bartlett, Tennessee, at Saint Ann Catholic Church, in safety and comfort. It is a very different thing to say who he is outside of that. The question is never merely academic or abstract. It always has a context. Here is what I mean.

Who do we say Jesus is in the face of racial tensions in our country?

Who do we say Jesus is as people in our town go to bed hungry, live in the middle of domestic violence, or work for a wage that cannot support a family?

Who do we say Jesus is when a loved one dies, the doctor gives news we did not want to hear, or our life seems to be falling apart?

Who do we say Jesus is when we are faced with decisions that have no easy answers; when the night is dark and the storms of life overwhelm us, when faithfulness means risking it all and taking a stand against a louder and seemingly more powerful majority?

Using the context of these few examples what does it mean to say Jesus is my personal Lord and Savior, my example, or my brother and friend? What does it mean to say Jesus is my life, the song I sing, or my teacher?

Here is my point. Who we say Jesus is has everything to do with who and how we are and will be. In some ways, our answer says as much or more about us than Jesus. It reveals how we live and what we stand up

for. It guides our decisions and determines the actions we take and the words we speak. It describes the expectations and demands we place on Jesus. It discloses the depth of our motivation for and commitment to following him, which will be challenged by next week's gospel in which Jesus invites us to take up our cross and follow him.

Jesus' question is not so much about getting the right answer as it is about witnessing and testifying to God's life, love, and presence in our lives and the world. It is less about our intellect and more about our heart. It is grounded more in love than understanding. It moves us from simply knowing about Jesus to knowing him.

In some sense, there is no once and for all, finally and forever, answer. We are always living in the question. Who Jesus was when I was a child is different from who he was when I was in my 30s or who he is for me today. Hopefully, who he is for me next year will be different from who he is today. It is not that Jesus has changed. I have. We are constantly engaging his question and in so doing we not only discover Jesus anew we discover ourselves anew.

Sometimes we discover a disconnection between the **“Sunday Jesus”** about whom we sing and talk for an hour and the life we live the other 167 hours of our week. Our words and actions don't align. There is no congruity or integrity. I don't say that as a judgment about anyone but in acknowledgment of just how difficult it can be to recognize and live the truth that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

More than once I have fallen into the gap between my “**Sunday Jesus**” kind of answers and the circumstances of my life and world. Sometimes my answers were too simple, too small, too easy. They were no match for the difficulties of life and the pain of the world. Other times my life has not reflected what I said about who Jesus is. Sometimes I kept quiet when I should have spoken up. Other times I was passive when I should have done something. Whenever I fell into that gap, it was because I was trying to play it safe. That rarely works.

There is nothing safe about the question Jesus poses. How could there be? There is nothing safe about Jesus or the life to which he calls us.

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Jesus’ life and presence among us call into question everything about our lives, our world, the status quo, and business as usual. That is why we ought not to answer his question too quickly, too casually, or with too much certainty.

It is not a question to be figured out as much as it is a question to be lived. **Amen.**