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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC
Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 24, 2008

Romans 12.1-8
Matthew 16.13-20

And You?

“But who do you say that I am?” – Matthew 16.15

This is one of those Bible passages that challenges my sensibilities as a preacher. When it comes up, I feel a bit like a wedding singer who is expected to sing Van Morrison’s “Moondance” just a certain way. There’s an expectation. There’s a performance that fits the song. But it is so easy to end up with a hackneyed rendition. And nobody wants to be a stereotype. (Especially not someone as *unique* as me! Ha!)

There stereotype looming here is a sermon title with *italics*. It has been done a million times, and yet the font sits there on the page acting so clever: *Look at me! I’m finding a creative new meaning in an old familiar text!* And, of course, like “Moondance” is a great song, this is a great text and it does seem to call forth a certain mode of interpretation. Jesus’ question to his disciples does seem to depend on emphasis—and thus the opening for the dreaded italics

Who do you say that I am? (A sermon...on Christ’s identity.)

Who do you *say* that I am? (...on our witness of faith.)

Who do you say that *I* am? (...on Jesus’ self-understanding.)

Who do you say that I *am*? (...on?...let’s see...ontology?)

Who *do* you say that I am? (...on Christian ethics, how we act.)

You get the idea. Some of these are a pretty long stretch, obviously, but I’d be willing to bet that desperate preachers have tried them all. But, of course, I’ve left off the most popular one:

Who do *you* say that I am? (...on individual belief about Jesus.)

All of the options notwithstanding, it is the most popular one that gets the closest to where I wanted to go this morning. But I just couldn't bring myself to use those tawdry old italics. So I went, instead, for the tone of low-key cocktail party banter: And you? And you? What do you think and believe about Jesus?

In the original Greek of this text, there is a clear signal about emphasis. Greek doesn't use italics, but establishes emphasis by word order. This sentence starts with "you." Sort of like—You there! Who do you say that I am? So it would seem to fit into the classic mold of a sermon designed to make each person in the pew squirm about the inadequacy of his or her own understanding of Jesus. It would seem to evoke the vaguely threatening sermon that pushes us to get our individual beliefs in order. Who do *you* (and *you* and *you* and *you*) say that I am?

It is tempting, let me tell you. All the preacher has do is to cloak his or her own doubts and questions about Jesus. (Which we all have, to some degree or another.) Then just start pounding the pulpit and pointing the finger of judgment. Sort of the church equivalent of a pop quiz—less effective as a teaching tool when it is administered for punishment than for educational measurement. Spit wads on the blackboard yesterday = pop quiz today. Low stewardship drive last week = sermon with *italics* this week. (I believe the technical term for this is P.A.P.—Passive Aggressive Preaching.)

But...once again the scholars and commentators have spoiled the fun...because there's a problem with the preacher's beloved italicized *you*. In the Greek it is a plural "you," not a singular. Jesus is not addressing the disciples as individuals, but rather as a group. He wants his community to sharpen its understanding of his identity. And in Matthew's gospel, in particular, it is the community that is the focal point. Matthew's version of the story is much longer than either Luke or Mark's. Peter does not stand out as the lone disciple who "gets it," but rather as the representative disciple who helps the church establish itself as the community that follows "the Messiah, the son of the living God." In Mark and Luke, the emphasis is more on individual belief—Jesus is named out loud for the first time as Messiah. In Matthew, that

already happened a couple of chapters ago. This is not “news” for the Matthean disciples. Instead, Jesus is helping them to build something new: a church.

The church is established in this story and built on the rock of Peter’s articulation of the community’s faith in Jesus. It is an unrepeatable act—the church only gets established once. But the church in each generation must still reclaim and recommit to the faith it receives. You there! Who do you say that Jesus is?

To some extent we need to figure this out on our own and that’s one reason why books about Jesus still sell pretty well after all of these centuries. But this text also gives us a model for theological reflection about Jesus. Like the disciples, we need to consult what others are saying—we need to learn and pay attention to the traditions we receive about Jesus—stories, theologies, creeds. From these we have a pretty clear sense of Christian orthodoxy on the subject. But then we need to test and struggle with that orthodoxy and dare to articulate our own formulations. When we do this faithfully, and as a community, I believe that God will provide us to a vibrant and usable faith for today.

Today’s text provides no more than a starting place. Who do we say that Jesus is? We might like to say that he was just a great teacher or someone acting in the mode of the prophets. But because we are part of a community, we must also grapple with Peter’s proclamation: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Our church is the same church that Jesus built on the foundation of Peter’s statement of faith. And, so, we must remain in conversation and in communion with Peter and the early Christian community. We are called to struggle and to grapple with the identity of Christ, but our grappling takes place within the walls of the Christian church—a church that was alive and vibrant before we came on the scene in 1716 and that will, God willing, continue to be so long after we are gone.

Who do *we* say that he is? (There’s the title I was looking for!)