

Sermon: Who Is Jesus?
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We all face crucial questions in our lives. How many of you grandparents out there have asked your grandson or granddaughter, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” The answers are often “a policeman” or “a doctor” and we smile knowing that these choices will likely change many times over the coming years. Nonetheless, these questions are crucial in helping children form healthy attitudes about themselves and their world. Mary Oliver, one of my very favorite poets, says in the poem *Summer Day*, “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” As we mature, this question is not to be taken so lightly, and requires some thought before answering—and such a question can have a dynamic impact on us. About seven weeks ago, I was asked, “My sister, do you believe that you are truly called by God and his Church to the life and work of a deacon? My answer changed my life forever and brought me here to The Church of the Redeemer.

In Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 16, verse 15, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say I am?” Peter responds by saying, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” In a way, today’s Gospel poses the same question as a result of not just one, but two, of Jesus’s miraculous signs. It’s how we understand these miracle stories that gives us a clue to the way we answer, “*Who do you say I am?*”

The first miracle story in today’s reading is commonly known as *The Feeding of the Five Thousand*. It is the only story that is found in all four Gospels. In John’s account, we have seven signs that Jesus does, and this one is the fourth one. In the story, the crowds have been following Jesus as he healed the sick and taught them about the Kingdom of God. He sees the crowd, and has compassion on them, takes a boy’s offering of five loaves and two fish and feeds them: all five thousand plus of them. And not only are they satisfied, but the disciples then gather up the leftovers and end up with twelve baskets full of bread. Had you been there; had I been there, would we have been utterly astounded like some of the disciples? Would we have been amazed by the abundance that Jesus provided out of the scarcity he faced? Some preachers and scholars would perhaps talk today about the implications of how this story prefigures the Eucharist. Jesus is, after all, the bread that comes down from heaven. According to Ginger Barfield, however, “These narratives have so little to do with bread. Today’s text has all to do with how Jesus acted in order to show who he is. Jesus responded to the needs of the crowd and the disciples. Jesus is active through both miracle and simple presence” (Working Preacher).

Jesus asks, *Who do you say I am?* In this account, God is doing nothing less than intervening in human history in a new way through Jesus (*Catholic Study Bible*). Jesus has compassion on the people in the crowd, and he feeds them. He shows them hospitality. *Of course* there are parallels in The Old Testament when Moses goes up the mountain, talks to God, and God provides manna for the Israelites, but that story is fraught with complaining, anger, and dissatisfaction. While Jesus is certainly establishing himself in that line of the prophets by going up the mountain to sit with his disciples in verse three, John is much more interested in the sign itself. The people sat down and ate as much as they wanted. Then the disciples gathered up the leftovers—twelve baskets full of bread.

Who do you say I am? I believe Jesus wants us to recognize that he was showing us a new way to live. In this act of hospitable feeding, Jesus models for us the feeding of others. I experienced that hospitality just this past week when I was invited to the men's group to join them for breakfast—and for you men who do not attend, I assure you that you are missing a mighty fine spread. We participate in that hospitality when we contribute time to organizations like The Samaritan House. We also take part in hospitality when we gather after the liturgy for our coffee hour to catch up with each other and to share our lives: the struggles and the blessings. Jesus was one who fed others, and he feeds us even now. In turn, we go out in his name to hospitably serve as his hands and feet to feed others.

Who do you say I am? This question runs through all the Gospels. One commentator, Robert Hoch, says, “Living a Christian life, whatever that may mean, and difficult as it may be, probably has not been made progressively harder over the centuries. But defining how a Christian should understand Jesus has” (Working Preacher). Serving this Jesus can also be difficult in our troubled world. I'd like us to think about those twelve baskets of bread that were left over after this miracle. There were twelve disciples, twelve baskets. Each one had a full basket to work with. When we serve Jesus giving more than we ever think we can, Jesus is there for us. He is the bread that satisfies. And so, the more we give to others, the more we receive from Jesus.

Who do you say I am? In the Gospel account, the crowd starts to come and take Jesus by force to make him king. He withdraws by himself to the mountain to stop their actions. Brian Peterson comments, “Instead of seeing in Jesus the very embodiment of God's glory, love, and Word, they see a king, a political or military figure who might serve their desires” (Working Preacher). Is that how we see Jesus? As a deity who serves our desires? Or do we see Jesus as the Messiah, the Savior, the Word Incarnate? Do we clearly see what God is doing among us or do we look for a Jesus who will bend to our desires and wishes?

Who do you say I am? Like the disciples, we may sometimes find ourselves in situations that are frightening and threaten our well-being. That's the case in the second miracle that takes place in today's Gospel. Since Jesus had gone up the mountain to pray, the disciples decided to get in the boat and head over to Capernaum because it was getting dark. While they are still at sea, the wind picked up and the sea became rough. As they were struggling to row across the lake, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat. Of course, they were terrified. Can you even imagine their fear? But Jesus tells them to not be afraid, gets into the boat, and they arrive at the place they were going.

Again, I see Jesus promising something important to his disciples. In the first part of the story, Jesus gives the disciples bread. He feeds them. In the second part he comes to them physically assuring them that he is with them. The disciples were afraid, and they felt that Jesus could not possibly help them because he was not with them. But ironically, he was with them. He even walked on water to get to them. Jesus supplies what we need in order to do ministry in his name, and when we feel afraid and overwhelmed, he comes and gets in the boat with us.

These ideas are further expanded in today's Epistle. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, assures the Ephesians that they are “members of the body of Christ, and therefore they have access to God” (Working Preacher). When we consider who Jesus is, we are considering the Christ dwelling in our hearts. Paul says we worship a God of power who is rich in mercy, lavish in his grace and rich in wisdom. And in verse 18, one of my favorite verses, Paul says “may

[God] grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love” (Ephesians 3:18, NRSV). *Rooted and grounded*. This is such a powerful phrase that surely appeals to other gardeners like me. It’s so important for a plant’s survival that the roots have room to expand and find nourishment that the plant needs. According to one commentator, Paul goes on to say “Christ and his church are deeply and intimately one...that means that all who are incorporated into the church by faith and baptism are also in union with him, who is their Lord (Working Preacher). Looking closely at verses 16-18, we find that Christ strengthens us believers by indwelling through faith. New Testament professor, Arland J. Hultgren assures us, “If we have time to listen to one another, we discover stories of faith beyond our own. In conversations with others, listening to their prayers, and observing acts of kindness and generosity, we gain understandings of God and the world that we have not known before” (Working Preacher).

Who do you say I am? Jesus asks us today just as he asked Peter who joined him in the ministry of feeding and healing that we read about in the Gospels. Richard Rohr says, “Jesus was teaching an alternative wisdom that shakes the social order instead of upholding the conventional wisdom that maintains it” (Center for Action and Contemplation). Do you see in Jesus the hospitality that opens the table up to those who are hungry? Do you see in Jesus the compassion that calls us to clothe the naked, visit those in prison, and simply care for others lovingly? Do you see a Jesus who provides for us; who comforts us in our fear and anxiety. Do you see a Jesus who asks us to love each other the way that God loves us? Again, Brian Peterson tells us, “Jesus comes across the fearful, lonely, empty, threatening times and places, and says “I am.” The “I am” has come to be with us and bring us to the goal God has intended” (Working Preacher). *Who do you say I am?*