

# Who Do You Say That I Am?

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Well, now we're into the last of the lazy, hazy days of summer and I haven't finished all the reading I intended to do—too much preoccupied with the Olympics and presidential politics.

I'll tell you what I like to read for diversion—biographies and mysteries. I've probably read at least four of the dozens of biographies of Lincoln, the last being "Team of Rivals." I just finished P.D. James' "A Certain Death" and I'm resolved to finish Alan Greenspan's autobiography. I've always enjoyed biographies and even reading obituaries; I suppose to get some perspective on the way that people have filled out their lives and what they have left as a legacy for those who have come after them.

But nothing compares with the life of Jesus, for which the four gospels are the foundational documents. I say "foundational documents," for the truth is, the life of Jesus' is an open-ended story, a serial story running down through the centuries. There are countless books about Jesus' that are written every year, asking and trying to answer the same question that Jesus' poses to his followers in the gospel passage today, "Who do you say that I am?"

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks. St. Paul wasn't there but he has a surprising answer for us this morning. Isn't it fascinating that this is still such a powerful question? Is it part of our interest in people's private stories, an impulse that multiplies talk shows and sells People magazine? Is it our need to humanize our heroes to make them more accessible? Is it simply part of our enduring need to tie our lives to something deeper, a need that may get confused, but never really fades?

The answer is probably a little bit of both. And the key to discovering that answer for our time lies so much in the legacy that one man has given us, St. Paul.

This morning we read and hear some of the apostle Paul's answer to the age-old question by and about Jesus. After Paul's famous conversion on the road to Damascus he spent his life writing and traveling to churches around the Mediterranean, and writing about their life and the meaning of Jesus' life and death. He wrote 13 of the 27 books of the New Testament and he is the hero of another, the Acts of the Acts. Critics of Christianity go as far as saying that St. Paul was the founder of our faith. Certainly

Paul's letters to the churches were written before the four Gospels, but it is only from his own transforming experience of the living power of Jesus' life that Paul could write what he did.

The greatest of Paul's letters to the churches is the Book of Romans from which our second lesson is taken this morning. The first eleven chapters before the Gospel passage this Sunday are not easy reading, but amazing in their perception of a meaning for the life of Christ that transcends all that can be said of any other religious figure in human history.

Paul had worked out, in the first eleven chapters of this letter, his understanding of how we are justified, accepted, made right with God. This is a new relationship with God bought through the Cross of Jesus', but now a free gift for all who would accept that new life. That understanding may seem difficult even for Christians today, but I'm telling you, it simply blew the minds of the people of his own time, especially the Jews whose culture for centuries had been that the law and the prophets were the whole word of God.

Nevertheless, after Jesus' death on the Cross a miracle was happening. Thousands upon thousands around the known world were gathering to find new life in their experience of the spirit of Jesus Christ in their midst. Paul was trying to make sense out of that for his listeners, but for those who had not had his experience it sounded as if the new faith had removed all the ethical boundaries, and that new religion actually encouraged sin. Could it be that if sin becomes an occasion for God to display his grace—the more sin, then the more grace?

That by itself was nonsense, and it failed to recognize the moral transformation that occurs when one is united with Christ in baptism. However, it's one thing to say that, it's another to convince a non-believer that it's true.

So here comes Paul's answer in this 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul's letter. After all he's written before, now he says therefore- the famous "therefore" of Christian ethics—Therefore, because you have discovered the power of the risen Christ in your life, you are called to respond in two ways (1) To offer up everything in your life to God (2) and show that by the way that you connect yourself with everything else in the community of all of God's creatures.

Offering and Connectedness—It's good news that discovering Jesus Christ is that important and that powerful, but it's disturbing news if you think what the outcome, the consequences of such a life can be.

Think for a while of what it means to live a whole life that is perceived as an offering to God. That's light years more than just thinking about "offering" as the envelope or the twenty-dollar bill you put in the "offering" plate on Sunday morning for your ticket of

admission, or the \$500 pledge check you write every month as your subscription to keep St. James' going—giving something, to get something.

In a book by Kester Brewin, "The Complex Christ" the author explores the difference between a "gift exchange" and "market exchange" and establishes an understanding of true community and relationship as being interwoven with freely given gifts. Gifts beget gifts, thus establishing true, shared community. So understood from a gift mentality, spiritual worship is "not about what I am looking to get out of it, but what I'm looking to give!"

"Looking at it that way, we don't want to stop global warming just because we now know we must do that, *but because we believe that creation is a gift from God, not a commodity.*" That's a quote from Brewin's book, and that's a help to me in understanding what Paul is saying. Paul is reflecting on his own experience of finding that Jesus Christ had opened the door for him of an undeserved but freely given relationship of love and connection. So, with this gift, THEREFORE he appeals to his listeners to do what he had done, to offer ourselves—all that we are and all that we have—as a ***personal, lively, living sacrifice to God.***

And then this appeal raises the curtain to the most profound, and now for us the most contemporary answers to Jesus' question, "who do you say that I am?"

For here in the short six verses 12:2-8 we have just read, and in t six words from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, Paul declares that "YOU are the Body of Christ." For, as we read this morning, "as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many are the one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another."

The book "A Complex Christ," and others like it, seek to relate these insights of Paul to the reality of global connectivity that increasing millions are beginning to understand and accept.

An old recollection I've offered before comes to mind. In 1972—36 years ago—at the annual meeting of the North American Cathedral Deans Conference, a cathedral dean colleague told about a Sierra Club poster that showed a flower growing up in the middle of rocks with the caption "everything is connected to everything else" to illustrate his new global understandings (and even contrasted that by singing Archie Bunker's theme song "those were the days").

This insight was something of a new discovery for me too, then. It still is for many people, but now thanks to growing acceptance of global warming and melting glaciers, and global economics with a voice from India answering our "help line" calls, everyone

is challenged to understand and accept a world symbolized by Pepco's slogan "we are connected by more than power lines."

I don't find all this very easy to understand, much less accept. Where, I ask with you, will we find the connections that are more than just from technology and traditional social and religious organizations?

For me that question inspires me on my never-ending journey in faith. I can tell you that in new and refreshing ways I return to Paul's words for my illumination on the path of discovering who Christ is, for the times we live in. And I find new conviction and renewed faith as, I said two weeks ago, when I come with you to the altar this morning, to find, here, the risen Christ's living presence that fills all things and draws us all to himself, around a table at a meal, where we matter, where we care, and everyone has a place. AMEN