

But What Do *You* Think?

Matt 16:13-23

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" (Matt 16:13-15)

In one of his famous "letters to a young poet," Rainer Maria Rilke encourages his protégé to sit with what he doesn't know. He writes:

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.¹

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus invites his disciples to live a question. "Who do you say that I am?" he asks as they make their way through the villages of Caesarea Phillipi. Who am I? Where do I stand in this life we're making together? What do I mean to you?

Perhaps you're thinking, "Wait, that's not the kind of question Rilke is talking about in his *Letters*. Jesus's question is not a question to *live* with; it's a question to *answer*. It's a creed question. A doctrinal question. A question requiring conviction and certainty. There's nothing 'unsolved' about Jesus, is there? Isn't he the Way, the Truth, and the Life?"

Yes, he is. *And yet*. If his conversation with his disciples has anything to say about it, we are *still* meant to live the question of who Jesus is. We're not meant to "solve" God once and for all. We're not meant to land when it comes to theology; we're meant to journey, wander, explore, and question.

1. Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, 21.

As Matthew tells the story, Jesus prefaces his big question with an easier one: "Who do people say that I am?" What's the word on the street? What have you heard? What do the opinion polls suggest?

I don't know about you, but I can hear the schoolboy relief in the disciples' voices as they scramble to answer Jesus's question: "Oh, I know! People say you're John the Baptist! No, wait, they say you're Elijah! Actually, some folks think you're Jeremiah. Yeah, but others say you're one of the prophets!"

I'm guessing they go on for a while, each disciple trying to drown out the others with a more promising answer. Not coincidentally, the answers they come up with match the religious factions they're partial to. To put this in contemporary terms, imagine the disciples answering Jesus's question this way: "There's the Lutheran take on who you are. But here's the Calvinist one. Of course, the Anglicans say something else. No, wait, let's hear what the Evangelicals think. And the Catholics! Yeah, but what about the Pentecostals? Or the Orthodox? The agnostics and atheists have opinions, too."

Interestingly, Jesus neither affirms nor denies these answers. He simply listens, allowing his friends to offer up everything they think they know. As if to say: this is an okay place to begin. This is where all explorations of faith begin, in naming what we've heard, examining what we've inherited, and parroting back the certainties others have handed to us. These answers cost us little; they simply hearken back to tradition and offer us a foundation to build on. But we cannot stop there. At some point, the question of who Jesus is must become personal.

So Jesus presses on. "But who do *you* say that I am?" Looking at each disciple in turn, he awaits a more intimate answer, inviting them to set aside other people's theologies and articulate their own. It's as if Jesus asks them to consider carefully the life they've lived *with* him, in his company. The bread they've broken, the miles they've walked, the burdens they've carried, the laughter and the tears they've shared. "Who am I *to you*?" he wants to know. "How have *you* experienced me?"

Matthew doesn't offer much detail, but when I imagine what happens next, I see the disciples falling into an awkward silence. I imagine them avoiding eye contact with Jesus. Shuffling their feet. Casting anxious glances at each other. I imagine every one of them hoping that someone else will answer first.

Meanwhile, I imagine Jesus standing vulnerably in their midst through that long silence, waiting to hear what his closest friends will say. Do they know him? Have they learned to trust him? How much have they comprehended of his mission and vision, and how much are they willing to confess? Do they love him enough to speak a truth that might cost them?

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Cue Peter. Bold, reckless, impetuous Peter. When the silence becomes unbearable, he throws himself forward and stakes his claim: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God” (Matt 16:16).

A perfect, A-plus answer. The Truth with a capital “T.” Right?

Well, sort of. Jesus commends and blesses Peter for the answer. He declares that he will build his church upon “the rock” of Peter’s bold testimony. And he promises Peter “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (vv. 18, 19). All of this is true and powerful and worth celebrating.

But it’s not the end of the story. When Jesus goes on to describe the suffering and humiliation his messiahship must include, Peter backtracks, pulls Jesus aside, and tells him to shut up. Such morbid talk is not worthy of a real Messiah.

Peter’s insistence that Jesus fit into his watered-down comprehension of divinity hits a nerve so raw, Jesus turns and rebukes him with words that shock us still, two-thousand years later: “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things” (Mark 8:33).

As strange and stinging as this exchange is, I like what it teaches us about “living the questions” of faith. I like that Peter’s confession—“You are the Messiah”—signals the *beginning* of his exploration of Jesus’s identity, not its end. As soon as Peter thinks he has the answer to the question nailed down, Jesus shuts *him* up. Jesus challenges what he knows and nudges him back to the starting line: “Yes, I am the Messiah. But no, you have no idea what ‘Messiah’ means. In fact, you’re not even *ready* to know what ‘Messiah’ means; you can barely tolerate my talking about it. There’s so much more for you to learn, Peter. So many more answers for you to grow into. Be patient. Don’t force the locked doors. Try to love what is unsolved. Keep living the question.”

When I think about the whole of Peter’s story—all the biographical details that we have the privilege to know and ponder—I’m stunned by the answers that Peter must have lived into as time went on. Answers he could not have articulated in the early years of discipleship.

“Who do you say that I am?” You are the one who found me in a fishing boat and gave me a new vocation. You’re the one who healed my mother-in-law. You’re the one who said, “Okay, walk on water.” You’re the one who caught me before I drowned. You’re the one who glowed on a mountaintop while I babbled nonsense. You’re the one who washed my feet while I tried to stop you. You’re the one who told me—accurately—that I’d be a coward on the very night you needed me to be brave. You’re the one I denied three times to save my skin. You’re the one who looked into my eyes with pain and pity when the cock crowed. You’re the one who fed me breakfast on a beach and spoke love into my humiliation. You’re the one

who gave me courage to preach to three-thousand people on Pentecost. You're the one who taught me that I must not call unclean what you have pronounced clean. You're the one who stayed by my side through insults, beatings, and imprisonments. You're the one I followed into martyrdom. You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Who do *you* say that Jesus is? Who has he been to you in the past? Who is he now? Who do you hope he will be in the future? These are questions to ponder for a lifetime, questions that have so many others folded into them, we'll never exhaust the possibilities. What stories of Jesus have you inherited? What "truths" about him do you need to say goodbye to? What religious assumptions are you clinging to because they're familiar, safe, or easy? Why are you afraid at times to answer the question at all? Why does it fill you with shame? Is Jesus merely *the* Messiah? Or is he yours?

What Peter learns is that Jesus is just as powerfully present in the questions as he is in the answers. Maybe even more so. To love what is unsolved is to allow Jesus to enter more deeply into your heart than any impersonal claim about him will ever do. *Live the question.* That is Jesus's invitation, and he makes it over and over again to each one of us. An invitation of love.