When a rabbi was asked, “Why is it that you rabbis put much of your teaching in the form of a question?” the rabbi replied, “So what's wrong with a question?” In Judaism, asking questions is a time honored way of getting to the heart of a matter, of engaging in dialogue that demands more from each participant in a conversation. So, if one Jew asks another, “How are you?” the rote answer would be, “Fine,” and the conversation would continue or perhaps the two people would go on their way. However, if the person being asked has the sense that the one asking is doing so more out of concern than as a casual greeting, the woman or man might reply, “How am I? Do you mean how am I physically, emotionally, financially or spiritually?” In such a relationship, “What do you mean?” becomes a frequent tool that connects the questioner and the hearer, leading them to rely less on assumptions and more on a shared understanding of the subject at hand and of one another.

As a good rabbi, Jesus used questions in his teaching. Perhaps the most memorable time is when he asked his disciples for some feedback, “Who do people say that I am?” At first, the answers required little from the disciples but repeating what they had heard. “Who are you? Well, some people are saying you're John the Baptist. Some other people are saying Jeremiah or Elijah or maybe one of the other prophets.” Jesus could have gotten those answers from just about anyone on the street. Instead, he was looking for answers that engaged the hearts of his disciples, that revealed an understanding of Jesus' identity and the disciples' connection to that identity. “But who do you say that I am?” This was way more personal. This went beyond what other people were saying and was asking for an answer based on a close relationship with Jesus. “But who do you say that I am?” Peter went first. When he blurted out, “You're the Messiah, the Son of the living God!” we get the sense that he opened a door for himself and the others to a deepening trust between them and Jesus, for Peter's answer appeared to come from the depths of his heart and not from interviewing citizens on the street. “Okay, then,” we can imagine Jesus saying to his disciples. “Because we have an understanding of who I am, let me tell you what's going to happen to me and, by extension, to you. The last stop on our journey together is going to be Jerusalem and things are going to get ugly there, uglier than what we've seen so far. I am going to be betrayed by officials in the church and in the government and they are going to kill me. Three days after that, I will be raised from the dead.”

It was too late for Peter to take back his answer to Jesus' question, “Who do you say that I am?” but don't you think he wished he could? It would have been so much easier to go back to being Jesus' traveling companions and agents, going ahead of him into towns and making reservations in hotels and venues where he would speak, keeping him company on the long walks to the next gig. Now it seemed that Jesus wanted to include his disciples in the nasty business of betrayal and crucifixion. This was not what they signed up for and Peter was the first to remind Jesus of that. “God forbid, Jesus! That can't happen to you!” It was an instantaneous transition for Peter to go from the rock on which Jesus would build his church to a stumbling block in Jesus' way, from someone confessing Jesus' true identity to someone who couldn't see past his own needs and fears.

To Peter's utter horror, Jesus was on a roll now. His move from “Who do you say that I am?” to “If any want to become my followers,” was seamless. It was as if Jesus was saying, “Okay, you want to know what it means if I am the Messiah? Here's where you come in. Deny yourselves. Take up your cross. Follow me. Lose your life to find it.”

“Who do you say that I am?” Our rabbi Jesus asks us this question every day. Each morning, when we stand in front of the mirror and start planning the day, it's as if Jesus is on the other side, “What are you going to say about me today? What are you going to do? Who do you say that I am?” It's the ultimate question for a Christian and it's a question that requires everything of us – body, soul, mind and spirit. It's the question that invites us, allows us, demands us to meet Jesus at the foot of the cross and discover what that means for our days here on earth.

For Jesus, the cross was the final stop in a ministry that spoke truth to lies, that stood up to authority, that took the side of the oppressed against the oppressors, that gave a voice to the voiceless and lifted up those who were bowed down. Jesus challenged the values of his day: he lived in a culture that prized wealth and power, a church that too often was in the pockets of a chosen few, a worldview that celebrated violence as the answer to many of civilization's questions. Sound familiar? As those who follow Jesus, who begin our journey at the cross, we become part of the audacious voice of Jesus that speaks an emphatic no to oppression, to lies, to power that is used for selfish gain. When Jesus asks us, “Who do you say that I am?” he challenges us to more than putting a pretty cross around our necks and coming to church on Sunday. Jesus calls us to a radical understanding of who he is: the power beyond all earthly power, the peace that is even now sweeping this planet, the truth that lays bare all lies, the love that makes all women, men and children equal in his sight. Standing in the shadow of his cross means that you and I sometimes say and do things that rattle those in power, that shake the status quo. It means we reach out to hold the hands of those the world tells us are not worth our time. It means we speak out against all forms of hate and discrimination. It means we say and do things that reflect the love of God for all God's creation. It means we do not invent false crosses to bear, but that we lay all we have at the feet of Jesus because we know we are already saved, already forgiven, already washed in the water that gives us new life here and in the life to come.

So, children of God, who are we? Who do we say that Jesus is? Don't worry: you and I don't have to come up with the perfect answer to that question; no one is going to give us a SOL test before we can move on to Religion 2.0. All Jesus asks is that we listen carefully and prayerfully to the question and let Jesus live out the answer through our hands and voices.

Amen.

*Pentecost 13A*

*September 3, 2017*

*Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish*

*Matthew 16:21-28*

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