

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT HE IS?
Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
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Matthew 16:13-20

Well, before very long, kids will be going back to school. Some of the school staff has returned already, and I think probably teachers are going back this week – and so – another year begins. Which means new clothes, new school supplies, books, schedules – all those fun things, but it also means that, before long, tests will come along too.

So, in the spirit of school starting, and to bring a smile to the faces of those who are not happy about it, I want to share with you something some of you may have seen on-line before – hilarious answers kids have given on tests. Now, if you haven't seen it before, I encourage you to google it sometime, because a lot of the examples can't really be explained verbally – you have to see them – but all of them are hilarious!

Here's just a sampling of the hilarity:

The question on the test was: What ended in 1896? (Of course, I'm fairly certain the teacher wanted the answer, "the Civil War.") But on this particular paper, when asked "What ended in 1896?" the student wrote, "1895."

How about this one? Where was the American Declaration of Independence signed? Answer? At the bottom!

Here's a clever one! Name six animals which live specifically in the Arctic. Ready? Two polar bears and four seals!

Finally, what did Mahatma Gandhi and Genghis Khan have in common? The student's answer? Unusual names!

Well, I could go on and on – but just one more. In a test about colors, the teacher asked, "What if your favorite hue?" The student wrote, "Jackman." Not a bad answer, if you ask me!

Anyway, in each of those cases, the student was not technically wrong. 1895 did end in 1896. The Declaration of Independence was signed at the bottom – and so on. But they weren't the textbook answers the teacher was looking for.

Well, in today's Gospel lesson there's a test, of sorts, as well. Jesus was together with his disciples and he asked them a question, "Who do people say that I am?" And unlike those students, the disciples answered him correctly, with, if you will, the textbook answers. "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." And all of that was true. That's who people were saying Jesus was.

But in this case, unlike the teachers of which I spoke earlier, Jesus doesn't want just a textbook answer – he wants more than that, so he rephrases the question. "But who do **you** say that I am?" In other words, don't tell me about the others, tell me about who I am for you.

And one of them stepped up and did that – Peter. He stepped up and confessed Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. He made it personal, for in those words he let Jesus know that he was the Lord of his life, his Savior, the One sent from God that he might experience abundant life.

So taken with Peter's words was Jesus, that he entrusted the future church into Peter's hands. He knew that Peter knew, deep down in his heart, the love Jesus had for him, and the power of Jesus in his life, and he knew that Peter would not only pass that on to others, but also encourage them to experience it for themselves.

And that's just what Peter did. Read on, especially in the Acts of the Apostles, and you'll see him repeatedly telling his faith story – not only the facts of Jesus' life, but Jesus' place in his life, Jesus' power in his life, Jesus at work in his life.

What a story it was! Picture yourself standing in a crowd and hearing Peter give his testimony. It might have gone something like this:

I was just a simple fisherman, when one day this man comes along and invites me on a journey with him. I wasn't sure I was the right person, but something, someone, compelled me to say yes, and I went. Eleven others went along with me, and for three years, we were in the presence of this amazing man. We watched as he loved and healed people. We listened as he taught us what real life is like. We saw him never change his message for fear of recrimination by the leaders of the world. We experienced his radical love and tried to answer his call to live that way ourselves.

Yet, along the way, I, Peter, got a reputation for my impulsiveness and impetuosity. When everybody else was thinking something, I was usually the one who blurted it out, like the time Jesus said he was going to eventually die and I objected and he called me out, saying "Get behind me, Satan!" Or the time, on the top of the Mount of Transfiguration when I didn't want that unbelievable moment to end and proposed we set up a memorial. It didn't make much sense, but I just blurted it out.

But those were nothing compared to what I did to Jesus in his final days on this earth. When the authorities were closing in on him, and his followers were bailing left and right, and I had assured him I would not do that, when the authorities actually came and confronted me, I caved and denied knowing Jesus – not once, not twice, but three times.

After all that, I deserved nothing but scorn and condemnation, but what did I get from Jesus? Forgiveness and the chance to begin again. He entrusted me with the leadership of his church.

That's my story. Who is Jesus to me? I'll tell you who - he's my Savior, my Friend, my Lord. He is the one on whom I lean, the one whom I trust, my constant companion and friend, the one for whom I live."

Peter's story. It's a powerful, powerful story of his love for and his life in Christ.

What's your story? If Jesus stood in front of you today, how would you answer his question, "who do you say that I am?" Would you have something more than textbook answers? I hope so.

There's a story about a little boy being asked once about why he was a Christian. His reply? "I don't know. I think it runs in the family!" (James W. Moore, *There's a Hole in Your Soul Only God Can Fill*, p. 18)

Friends, that's not good enough. You don't get faith simply because it runs in your family. You might get textbook answers to who Jesus is, but you don't get faith that way. It's personal.

Preacher Peter Marty puts it this way: "Talking about Jesus as an idea is a far cry from trusting your life to Jesus. Believing in the concept of God does not begin to compare with you actually knowing God."

He continues: "It's the difference between talking about love and telling someone that you love him or her. I'll take a kiss any day from someone whom I care about, over that same person just reading to me from a textbook about love. Emily Dickinson once wrote a poem to a distant and unexpressive love of hers. It began with this line: "To love me is one thing: to tell me you love me is another." That's the kind of difference (Marty concludes) Jesus seems to be hinting at." (Peter Marty, Day One, "Do You Love Jesus?")

So, again what is your story? Who do you say Jesus is?

I think I've told you before that I went through the entire ordination process without one person ever asking me who Jesus was to me. So for all the years I've

been on the Board of Ordained Ministry, I have asked every single candidate for ordination who came before us that question. How they answer it tells me instantly whether or not they know Jesus.

So, today, let me tell you who Jesus is for me, by way of a story. Many years ago, there was a woman who had a young son who showed great promise on the piano, so in order to encourage him to keep studying, she decided to take him to a concert by the legendary pianist Jan Paderewski. When the night arrived, they made their way to the concert hall, and found their seats right up close in the orchestra section and sat down. The shiny Steinway piano was the only thing on the stage. Before too long, the mother ran into a friend who happened to be sitting not too far away from her on her left, and they began to talk. Well, time got away from them and so engrossed were they in their conversation, that the mother was ignoring her child and his whereabouts.

The women stopped talking when the house lights went all the way down and it was pitch dark save for the bright spotlights now on over the stage, the spotlights that reflected off the beautiful, shiny Steinway piano. As the mother looked up to wait for the concert to begin, she was in shock as she saw her little boy sitting on the piano bench, with his hands on the keys.

Before she could move a muscle to retrieve him, the boy starts playing “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” Well, the audience roared in laughter, and she started to get out of her seat, when suddenly the great Paderewski appears from behind the curtain, and goes over to the piano. The little boy was startled and took his hands off the keys, but Paderewski said to him, “No, don’t quit. Keep playing.” And then he reached around the little boy to the left, put his hand on the keys and started improvising a bass part. Then he reached around the other side of the boy to add a running obbligato with his right hand. Well, it is said that the crowd was spellbound and when they finished, the crowd erupted with thunderous applause as the boy announced, “I didn’t know I could do that.” (The Rev. Dr. Norman Pott, Day One, “The Abiding Question”)

Now, why did I tell that story? Because that’s my story too. That’s who Jesus is for me. The one who, all along my life’s journey, has whispered in my ear, “Don’t quit. Keep playing! Keep trying! Keep using the gifts I’ve given you. I’m right here with you – on your right, on your left, making the tune you’re playing even more beautiful.”

When I graduated from college without a clue of what I wanted to do, it was Jesus who said, “Keep trying.” When I felt a call to ministry that I couldn’t imagine fulfilling, it was Jesus who said, “Answer the call. You may not think you can do it, but I’m with you, on your right and on your left. It will be okay.”

And no matter what life has brought my way, Jesus has been in my life and continues to be just like that great pianist, always there, always whispering encouragement, always telling me not to quit, it will get better or it will be okay – and through it all, he has never left my side.

Who is Jesus to me? That's who.

So, who is Jesus to you? How would you answer his question? Think about it, and come up with your answer, because someday, someone will want to know, someone will need to know. There are a whole lot of people in this world searching for something they can't identify, and you know the answer to their longing. It is Jesus, and you can help them find him.

Do me a favor, will you? Think about Jesus' question this week, and take some time to write down your answer. When I did it myself as I prepared this sermon, it was a wonderful reminder to me, particularly now, in this stress-filled world of ours, that the Jesus who has been with me since the beginning is with me even now, and all will yet be well.

My prayer is that thinking about your answer to the question, "Who do you say Jesus is?" will do the same thing for you. And, if you're so inclined, I'd love to hear your story, so drop me a line, send me an email or give me a call.

Friends, school is starting. It's time for your test. Who do you say Jesus is? May your answer be not just from your head, but from your heart. May it be so.

Amen.