

# Who Are You?

Texts: Nouwen Self-Rejection; Matthew 16: 13-27

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Do you remember those schoolyard quarrels you used to have with other kids, the ones where you were calling each other names?

“You’re a loser!” “I know you are, but what am I?”

“You’re so stupid!” “I’m rubber and you’re glue. What you say bounces off me and sticks to you!”

“I’m gonna knock your face in!” “I’d knock yours in, but that’d just improve it.”

“Why you ....” “Why not me? I’m much smarter than you!”

And on and on it went, if the kids were clever. If they weren’t, it usually began and ended with, “I know you are, but what am I?” repeated over and over and over: “I know you are but what am I?” “I know you are but what am I?” “Caw, Polly want a cracker! I know you are, but what am I?”

It seems like a rite of passage, to establish yourself, your identity, your place in the hierarchy of the schoolyard, at least for boys.

Kate tells me that girls go through something similar, but that it’s kind of “Mrow!” catty, and there’s a lot of gossiping and cliquing and backstabbing and claws-out betrayals in among the friendships.

What we call each other is important. They don’t have to be mean things, either. When they were younger we sometimes called Noah No No, or Cutey Patootie, and Emily was Em, or Tiny Hiney. Kate liked calling Adam Bubby. I call Kate Sweetheart and she calls me Loml, which sounds vaguely foreign and maybe Middle Eastern, but which actually is L O M L, for “love of my life,” Loml. What we call each other is important.

Today, Peter calls Jesus “Messiah.”

Now, this story comes up in the lectionary every year, so it must be important, and I think they take away your preacher’s card if you don’t preach on it, so that’s what we’re going to do, ‘cause I don’t want to risk losing my license.

But we're going to do it with a twist today, which will come later, so better start stretching now so you don't pull anything when we get there.

Jesus seems to be asking about his public perception, about what people are thinking, how his message is going down, how people are perceiving him. What names are they calling me? Or, in his own words, "Who do people say that I am?"

But before we get to the answers, let's hang out here by the question for a second. It's kind of a weird question, isn't it? I mean, *have you ever asked it?*

"Hey, honey, who do people say that I am?"

Or, like, to the guys in the locker room: "Yo, homeys, what's the word on Master Me Flash? Dog, or punk?" "You da dog, man! No way you punkin' it out!" "Word!"

(Shake head) I don't even know what demented part of my mind that came from. Wow!

No, it's a very strange question indeed, and we have simply become used to it because we've heard it so often, at least once a year from the lectionary.

Is this just insecurity on Jesus' part, trying to figure out how popular he is, like Sally Field at the Oscars? "Do they like me? Do they really like me?"

I don't think so. I don't think that he's actually worried about playing to the crowds, about checking the polls to see which way the wind is blowing.

It's not about insecurity, but it is important to what Jesus is doing in the world. The question itself tells us that who people think he is, is going to be mission critical at some point. And that point is coming up soon.

Jesus gets back various responses: "Time says you're John the Baptist come back."  
"Newsweek says you might be Elijah."

"Rush and Fox are raising questions about your father's name on your birth certificate. They want to see the long form before they will concede you might be one of the prophets."

Actually, we know that it's King Herod who thinks that Jesus might be his arch-nemesis, John the Baptist, come back to life.

And it's possible that others think so, too, because Jesus and John are second cousins, so they might look somewhat alike. And it's true Jesus started his ministry with the same message John had been preaching: Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.

If Herod thinks Jesus is John, that is foreboding indeed, an ill omen presaging trouble, as Herod has already disposed of John once, and may want to do it again.

Others are saying that Jesus is Elijah, remember that story? He was taken straight up to heaven without dying, and was supposed to come back before the Messiah came.

Of course, Elijah was a great confronter of kings and spoke truth to power, so if someone tells the Romans about this, they are sure to want to put Jesus to death before he gets out of control.

Also an "uh-oh, that could be bad" piece of news.

Others are saying that Jesus is one of the prophets, and prophets had a history of winding up dead, as Jesus himself once pointed out [*over in Luke 11: 47-48*]. So, more big trouble in little China, and a not auspicious piece of news.

Then Jesus turns to his disciples and says, "Well, how about you? Who do you say that I am?"

And Peter says, "You da dog, man, da big dog!"

Okay, so he doesn't say it that way, he says, "You're the Messiah," but that just sounds boring, like, *Yawn* "You're the tea and biscuits, sir," which is even more boring, and what he says is anything but boring.

It's like a thunder clap booming across the sky, one of those ones that just rolls on and on. "You are the hope of Israel, the hope of the world, you're the one we've been waiting for, you're the Lord, the Messiah." It just keeps echoing back and forth.

Boom shaka boom, this is it, God's gonna rule, the Romans are gone, the hypocrites are gone, King Herod's gone, we're gonna be on top for once, hallelujah, can I get me an amen brother disciples.

That's what it means, or, at least, what Peter means by it. And that's why Jesus tells them not to tell anybody about their discovery, not yet, not until they have some different content to that word, because that's not what Messiah means to Jesus.

Jesus immediately starts to redefine that word, Messiah, for his disciples. As the Spaniard says about the word 'inconceivable' in the movie *The Princess Bride*, "I do no' thing tha' word means wha' you thing it means."

We, as readers, are ready for it. It means death. Jesus is going to die. We're ready for it because we already know the rest of the story, and we're ready for it because we just heard what other people were saying about Jesus, and none of it meant anything good as far as not getting killed goes.

But Peter is not ready for it. He's still thinking "glory, power, can I sit next to you when you come in your kingdom," and so are all the rest.

So when Jesus starts to talk that way, about death and dying at the hands of the authorities, Peter, not wanting to embarrass Jesus, takes him aside privately and begins to rebuke him.

"Don't say that, don't say that, Lord, that will never happen to you! It can't! It won't!"

And here's where it gets mission critical: the Messiah has to die for the sins of the people, or no one can be saved. Yes, he will rise again from the dead, but first he has to die on a cross. That's what Messiah means from God's point of view.

Now that Jesus knows who *the disciples* say that he is, he has to correct their understanding of what that means. It's not something easy, a cakewalk through power and glory, as Peter says.

The one person we know from earlier in the story, the one person who has been telling Jesus that he can do it the easy way, and avoid all this nasty suffering and death business, just leap from the Temple and have the crowds adore him, and rule over all the kingdoms of the world, the one person who has said that before is the Tempter himself, Satan, during Jesus' time in the wilderness.

Peter is echoing Satan's words, so Jesus turns and rebukes Peter in front of all the disciples: "Get behind me, Satan."

It's a very strange turn for Peter. He's gone from being the hero with astonishing insight to the guy who got it all wrong and became the celebrity spokesperson for Satan, Inc, in about three minutes.

"Get behind me," Jesus says to Peter, that is, "Who do you think you are? You call me Messiah and Lord, but you want to get in front of me and tell me where I have to go. But that's

just wrong! You are my disciple, you are my follower, so get behind me and start following!”

That’s just like Jesus, isn’t it? To take a situation that starts with a question about who he is, and end it with a question about who we are.

You see, we, too, are standing on that road under the bright blue sky of Caesarea, we too are saying with Peter, “You’re the Messiah, the Lord!”

And Jesus turns to us and says, “I know I am, but what are you?”

And here’s where we get our twist. We thought this passage was about who Jesus is. But in the end, it’s also really about who we are.

The temptation for all of us is to skip over Jesus’ death, skip over the hard parts of discipleship, and get to the resurrection, get to heaven and glory without any of that tough discipleship stuff.

But Jesus will have none of that. He says its positively Satanic to think that way. “If any of you want to become my followers,” he says, “then deny yourselves, that is, don’t think selfishly, don’t think only about what you want, but start thinking about what others need, and take up your cross and follow me. For what gain will you really have if you gain the whole world, and lose your soul?”

We say, “Lord, Lord,” and again he says, “I know I am, but what are you?”

It’s all too easy, as Peter found out, to get out in front of Jesus, trying to telling him where to go, and who he has to be. But the proper place for a disciple is behind Jesus, behind his project of service to the world, behind his gracious acceptance of outcasts, behind his love and forgiveness.

Whenever we say Jesus is the Messiah, he asks us, but who are you? Let’s always live so that we can say, “We are your disciples, Jesus, and we will follow you through whatever comes, and all the way to the end.” Who are we? We are the people who want to be like you.

Amen