

Sermon given by Pr. Jeff Backer from St Dymas of South Dakota

August 27, 2023

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace, and peace to you this day from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. AMEN. **“Who do you say that I am?”**

Jesus asks this of his disciples, and to each one of you today. It is a basic question of faith whose answer has a profound impact on each one of you and your life. It is a question that all believers of Jesus must answer at some point in your lives; and not just once, but at various times in life: Who do you say that Jesus is?

When you think about it, every single person on this planet believes in something; about God or something else. There is an old assertion that says that there are no atheists in fox holes, but truly, there is no such thing as an atheist. Because all people put their trust and hope in something, even if it is themselves. But the answer to this question can vary a great deal, can't it?

Even we, Christian believers, believe in different things about the one, triune God; whom we all claim to worship. Not only that, but our theology, that is, our understanding of the nature of God, can change over our lifetime. In fact, it should change as we go through life, and especially as we grow in faith and understanding.

But the reason why this question is so very important, I think, is because how we answer this question directly affects how we live out our faith, and how we live out our lives in the world. For example, if you believe that God is a divine scorekeeper, keeping track of all your good deeds in one category and all of your bad in another, then you will probably try to live your life on very legalistic terms. Rather fearfully, you will try to make yourself better somehow, doing good deeds as often as you can, and trying to avoid sins and the things that separate you from God, hoping that you come out ahead on the good side in the end.

If, on the other hand, you believe that God is a universalist, all-accepting and all welcoming, but is rather distant from you, you may not really worry about your how your life plays out. “It’s all good; God will just accept me anyway.” I do my best and let God do the rest. But it goes even deeper than that. Because what we believe about God affects all sorts of other things like how we pray, where we put our hopes, where we turn when tomorrow is uncertain.

If we believe that God is distant, and simply watching events unfold in our world with little participation or influence, well then, what’s the point of prayer? What does it matter to ask God to change the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

If you think of God as a stern, punitive, judge, you might also avoid prayer, but for a different reason; because you want to fly below the radar, not bringing awareness to yourself; and above all, wouldn't dare ask God for favors.

Lately, I have been a little fixated with the singer, Jelly Roll. One of his popular songs right now is *Need a Favor*. The premise of the song puts a relationship with God in a certain perspective that you only go to God when you need something.

In the song, Jelly Roll states, “Who the hell am I to expect a Savior, if I only go to God when I need a favor.”

But, if we think of God as loving, grace filled, and merciful, we will turn to God in all times and circumstances, not only when we need help or advice, but when we celebrate his blessings or just to spend time in conversation with him about our day. What we think about God matters. Where we put our trust depends very much on what matters. It also affects how we face trials in our life. What we believe about God affects how we navigate our way through life.

Things like: Do you believe that God is with you in this place?

When you encounter hardship or challenges, do you blame God for it?

Do you believe that God is a deist, allowing things to just happen to you to somehow test your faith?

Do you believe that God uses hardship and struggle to help you to know him?

Do you trust that God can bring good out of pain and hardship?

You see; What you believe about God affects how you approach every aspect of your life, including how you make our way through days like today. So, what you believe about God matters, more than anything else in life.

Jesus initiated the conversation in today's gospel reading because Jesus knew that what the disciples thought of him would affect how they would live their lives going forward; especially after the cross. Their theology mattered. It mattered then, just as it matters now. So, Jesus sat the disciples down and had a theological conversation with them.

First, he asked them an easy question, “*Who do people say that I am?*”

Well, some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. It's an easy question, because they are just sharing what they heard, information, rather than what they believe. This really isn't a difficult question for any of us to answer. I can tell you information about Jesus, or anyone else, for that matter.

But then Jesus asked his disciples the harder question, the more important question: “*Who do YOU say that I am?*” Now, some might think this is an easy question, too. In fact, at face value, it seems Peter gives an informational response.

Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. We all know that. Again, that is just information. We know this stuff. But Jesus wants more than a children's Sunday School level answer. What Jesus wants is more than an informative answer.

No, what he wants is your confession?

He wants you to answer this question with more than the information in your head; your knowledge. He wants you to answer with your heart, and mind, and spirit.

So, again, who do you say that Jesus is? If Jesus himself were here to ask you that question, how would you answer it? Because he IS asking you today...but because it is my voice, you may not believe he is asking you.

Does your life reflect your answer?

What do you believe about God, really?

What do you believe about Jesus?

Because the answer to THAT question will set the course of your life, and it will define what your tomorrows look like. It matters more than anything else in this world.

But there is even more to this question, and I think it is very important to think about today. It is one of the reasons why I am a pastor. Because to me, just as important as *what* your answer to Jesus' question is, is *when* and *where* you ask it and answer it.

What do I mean by that? I mean that this question demands an answer not just here in at church, but when you are out in the world, when you are in conversations with those around you, when you are at home or at work. It is a monumentally important question if you have just received tragic news, or if you have received a diagnosis that has your life in its hands, if you are in a hospital room or in funeral home. It is a monumentally important question during those nights when you struggle to sleep because of worry and stress.

This question demands an answer not just when life is going well, but when life is falling apart.

That is when your theological rubber hits the road, so to speak. That's when it really matters. That's when what you truly believe about God matters. When your faith is tested. And when the answer is not just words, but it is life or death. What you believe about Jesus is more important there and then, than at any other time of life.

And so, Jesus asks you again; who do you say that I am? Answer it now with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. But there is one last piece of this question that is vitally important. Go back to Peter's answer to Jesus' question again.

After Peter answered that question, Jesus blessed him and told him that he would build his church, on Peter, on the rock, and that the gates of Hades, that is, even death cannot prevail against it. Jesus is not talking about Peter himself, but it is Peter's confession that is the rock on which Christ established and sustains his church. In this scene, this is the very first time that Jesus uses the word "church" in the gospels.

Don't you think that is significant? I do.

Peter's answer becomes the foundation of the church. Jesus promises to build his church on the solid rock foundation of faith. Not Peter's faith, your faith.

The church exists today because faith exists today. Faith is the gift of knowing God's favor. It is the very thing that clings to the promise that God has chosen you and is committed to you. And that connection is life changing. And so, he invites you here, again and again, into this community of faith that Jesus founded. Friends, a church is not a building, it is you, the people of God. The church is wherever two or more are gathered in His name.

Jesus knows that you won't be able to confess your faith in him if you are not active in a church, because faith comes by hearing, and this is the place to hear. Believing is simply too difficult to do alone, especially when the devil takes his swing at you. We need each other. We need our fellow believers. And Jesus knows it. Which is why he spends so much of his ministry building community; and is why he founded the church.

The church, any church, may not be perfect. No congregation is. But it is Jesus' plan for the world. He began the church, so that you would have a place to go, where you know that God meets you, to speak into your life. To share the gospel promises with all the world. To bring healing and hope and peace and justice and love, in his name, to the ends of the earth. And he promises that as we do this, nothing will prevail against his church. The gates of Hades will not prevail against his church.

Nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, and nothing will prevail against the church that Jesus founded. That is a theology that offers you a true and sure foundation. One that you can build a life of hope and meaning upon. One that can survive the storms and trials that this life inevitably throws at you.

What you believe about God matters; more than anything else in this world.

And there is no more important time to wrestle with this than right now, today. Amid all that you are going through in your life today, Jesus meets you here as he promised, so that you would hear his promise and believe in him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength; that he is your Savior, the Son of the living God.

He promises to walk with you through every moment of your life, he offers you a peace that surpasses understanding, he is eager to hear your every prayer, and he assures you that he will be with you always, even to the end of the age.

THAT is who Jesus is.

Thanks be to God. Amen