

Who am I? This is one of the primary questions of life. Who am I in the world? Who am I in my family? Who am I to God? What makes me ME? What makes me unique, unlike others, special?

What makes me ME? When I change by age or development, am I still the same person as I was before? What elements of my personality, what gifts and skills, what qualities are essential to my make-up and which are not?

But as we notice in our scripture lesson today, Jesus is not going through these existential questions of identity; he is not asking "Who am I?" but he is asking "What are OTHERS saying about me?" and "Who do **you** think I am?"

According to Malina & Rohrbaugh, in their *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, it was typical in the culture of Jesus for people to define themselves based on outside influences. That is why it is important to identify whether someone is "of Nazareth," "of Tarsus," or from some other place. "Encoded in those labels is all the information needed to place the person in question properly on the honor scale and therefore all the social information people required to know how to interact properly with him or her." (1)

So Jesus' question was not the modern one, "Who am I?" Rather, he asked "Who do people say that I (the Son of Man) am?" and "Who do you say that I am?" It is from significant others that such information came, not from the self.(2)

Let's look at those questions from the gospel of MARK 8: 27-30:

27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?" 28 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." 29 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." 30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

The first question sounds like an impersonal question, "Who are the people saying that this person is?" And the following answers are given:

- **John the Baptist:** Some scholars believe Jesus was an early follower of John's, but branched off at some point, drawing some supporters away from John. When John was killed, Jesus made a bid for the support of John's now-leaderless supporters, and largely succeeded. Some of John's supporters continued in John's name. To this day, there is a group called the Mandaeans, located now in southern Iraq, who trace their "religious lineage" to John the Baptist.

- **Elijah:** Elijah was the classic prophet, and, like Jesus, was from northern Israel. Elijah is also an eschatological figure, predicted to come at the end of times. In fact, the very last two verses of the Old Testament, Malachi 4: 5-6, say: "Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes."
- **Jeremiah:** Matthew adds "Jeremiah, the suffering prophet" to the list (Jeremiah is not mentioned in Mark or Luke.) Jeremiah and Jesus both opposed the religious and political establishment of their day, and both suffered for it. (3)

The second question is personal with "you" emphasized. Jesus asked, "**You**, who are you saying that I am?" This "you" is a plural "you", meaning Jesus was not only asking Peter for his answer, but he was asking the whole community. "Who do you all say that I am?"

This is a question as vital for us today as it was to the disciples in the time of Jesus. Who do we understand Jesus to be? Peter understood him to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God. But let's take a moment to describe Jesus in our words. Who do you understand Jesus to be? (Turn to the person next to you and answer the question Jesus asks us: Who do you say that I am?)

Teacher, Example, Saviour, Redeemer, Miracle-worker

Our answers determine how we view ourselves, how we understand our role in the world. What we name God – who we understand Jesus to be – is the name we call our God. And that naming has power, as written in our Psalm 124:8 "Our help is in the name of the Lord,
who made heaven and earth."

So, who are we "in his name"?

If we understand Jesus to be the ultimate peacemaker, reconciling warring factions, bringing together all sides to create a peaceful kingdom, how do we live "in the name of Jesus?"

If we understand Jesus to be the prime example for our living: how we should treat others, respond to conflicts, show love to one another, then how do we live "in the name of Jesus?"

If we understand Jesus to be our Savior, the ultimate in forgiveness and mercy and compassion, then how do we live "in the name of Jesus?"

In 1989, Henri Nouwen - Dutch-born Catholic priest and writer – wrote a small book called “In the Name of Jesus” and in it he advises Christian leaders to live in Christ’s name, by Christ’s example, by resisting the temptations of Christ faced in Matthew 4:1-11: The temptation to be relevant, The temptation to be spectacular, and the temptation to be powerful. Nouwen spent nearly 20 years winning renown as a famous author and teaching theology and psychology at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard before moving into the Daybreak L’Arche community for developmentally handicapped persons near Toronto.

In his book he describes his understanding of Jesus through his interaction with Bill, his friend and companion on a trip to give a lecture.

“As I was preparing my presentation,” he wrote, “I became deeply aware of the fact that Jesus did not send his disciples out alone to preach the word. He sent them two by two. I began to wonder why nobody was planning to go with me. If my present life is truly a life among handicapped people, why not ask one of them to join me on the journey and to share the ministry with me?”

After some consultation, the Daybreak community decided to send Bill Van Buren with me. Since my arrival at Daybreak, Bill and I had become good friends. Of all the handicapped people in the house, he was the most able to express himself with words and gestures.

Often, I had told Bill that those who are baptized and confirmed have a new vocation, the vocation to proclaim to others the good news of Jesus. Bill had listened to me carefully, and when I invited him to go with me to Washington, D.C., to speak to priests and ministers, he accepted it as an invitation to join me in my ministry. “We are doing this together,” he said at different times in the

have before us left "Voo." I kept saying "Voo."
"Last time, when Henri went to Boston, he took John Smeltzer with him. This time he wanted me to come with him to Washington, and I am very glad to be here with you. Thank you very much." That was it, and everyone stood up and gave him warm applause.

As we walked away from the podium, Bill said to me, "Henri, how did you like my speech?" "Very much," I answered, "everyone was really happy with what you said."

After I had finished reading my text and people had shown their appreciation, Bill said to me, "Henri, can I say something now?" My first reaction was, "Oh, how am I going to handle this? He might start rambling and create an embarrassing situation," but then I caught myself in my presumption that he had nothing of importance to say and said to the audience, "Will you please sit down. Bill would like to say a few words to you." Bill took the microphone and said, with all the difficulties he has in speaking,

As we flew back together to Toronto, Bill looked up from the word-puzzle book that he takes with him wherever he goes and said, "Henri, did you like our trip?" "Oh yes," I answered, "it was a wonderful trip, and I am so glad you came with me." Bill looked at me attentively and then said, "And we did it together, didn't we?" Then I realized the full truth of Jesus' words, "Where two or three meet in my Name, I am among them" (Matthew 18:19). (4)

Who do we understand Jesus to be and how do we live in his Name? As we live day by day, let us recognize our responsibility to represent Jesus in every task, in every smile, in every gesture, in every word. May we bear the name of Christ, be a model of Jesus' compassion and joy and peace and love. May we be the disciples we are meant to be and may we have the confidence to live in the name of Jesus.

1. Brian Stoffregen, found on <http://www.crossmarks.com/brian/matt16x13.htm>
2. Stoffregen.
3. John Petty, Progressive Involvement, found on http://www.progressiveinvolvement.com/progressive_involvement/2011/08/lectionary-blogging-matthew-16-13-20.html
4. Henri Nouwen, In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership