

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
September 13, 2009
Mark 8:27-38

“What Are You Saying About Me?”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Over the summer, flyers describing a missing cat appeared on the telephone polls in our neighborhood. Apparently Maggie was lost and her family, eager to have her back, made and posted flyers to help neighbors spot and return Maggie to their loving arms. The flyers included a drawing of Maggie and a description of her distinguishing features.

Apparently her formal name is “Magpie,” she is a small black and white cat, with ear tufts, a diamond shape on her nose, an “ink stain” on her neck, and a “tie” on her chest. These flyers went up all over the neighborhood and the description was excellent because Maggie was found and returned to her owners.

I thought about the flyers describing Maggie when I read the Scripture passage for today and I went out in my neighborhood in search of one of the flyers still fastened to a telephone pole. I thought about the flyers describing Maggie because in our reading from Mark today, Jesus asks Peter, “Who do people say that I am?” Then he asks, “Who do you say I am?” Or, as that second question is worded in *The Message*, “What are you saying about me?”

I find it interesting that Jesus wants to know how he is described by others and how he is described by his beloved disciple Peter.

“Who do people say that I am?

Who do you say that I am?

What are you saying about me?” Three interesting questions.

I began thinking about how easy it was to describe Maggie the cat but how difficult it is to describe Jesus.

And that led me to think about how difficult it is to describe any one of us.

And yet I think reflecting on how others would describe us is a good exercise to engage in this morning.

The question Jesus asks in the Biblical translation called *The Message* is, “What are you saying about me?”

And this morning, I invite you to ask yourself that same question.

What do people say about you? How do people describe you? How would you like to be described?

If your family or your circle of friends were to describe you, what would they say about you?

Would they say you were Loving? Generous? Feisty? Funny? Warm? Cranky? Out-going? Shy? Hard working? Loud? Soft-spoken?

Would they say you were “faithful?” Would they say you were “filled with the Spirit of God?” Would they describe you as a Christian?

Would you even WANT to be described as a Christian?

Yesterday, we remembered and celebrated the life of our Linda Small and we described her during the service....and Ann had described her in the obituary in the *Gazette*. We were able to accurately and honestly name Linda’s distinguishing features. We talked about her as a very loving, very funny, wonderful, giving person devoted to her wife Ann. We talked about how delightful she was even when she was wearing her contrary underwear.

We referred to her as a New Yorker transplanted to New England. We described Linda at length and in that description we included specific references to Linda’s faith, her relationship with Jesus and with God and her love of this Church...just as Ann had referred to Linda’s beloved church home in the obituary.

This morning I want you to ask yourself: what would people say about you?

What do people say about you now? When described by others, do people mention your faith, your relationship with God, your identification as a Christian?

I have heard the expression: If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you? Maybe you are thinking well no. No, people don’t describe me as a Christian, no one would say that about me. And then defensively you might add: And that’s okay with me because Christians are associated with oppressive, exclusive and painful attitudes and behaviors and I don’t want to be defined that way.

Well my friends. We need to reclaim the word Christian, we to demonstrate and radiate Christianity’s true values and redefine for others who Christians really are.

Some folks in this congregation define themselves as inclusive Christians, others as anti-racist Christians, progressive Christians, peace-loving Christians, gay-affirming Christians, feministly-oriented Christians, male-positive Christians, nonviolent Christians. We need to take back the term Christian and infuse it with inclusive, positive and life-affirming associations.

If people would NOT describe you as a Christian or a person of faith or someone filled with the Spirit or in communion with God or some terminology that lifts up your involvement with God, the Church, a community of faith, then you are probably believing in Jesus but not closely following him. Remember, Jesus did not say “believe in me” he said “follow me.”

And when you follow Jesus, it shows.

Let’s reflect on how Jesus himself wanted to be described. “Who do people say that I am? What are you saying about me? Who am I?” Jesus asked Peter. When Peter answered, “You are the Messiah,” Jesus ordered Peter not to tell anyone. Why?

Maybe because the image Peter and others in the early Jesus movement had of a Messiah was a Savior with military power who would rid them of Roman rule and defeat and destroy the Roman Empire.

Maybe Jesus wanted to be described in a different way, maybe he wanted it understood that he was not a King in the traditional sense or a military leader or ruler—but the incarnation of the nonviolent coming of God, a transforming power whose only “weapons” were love, generosity, justice, compassion, and a deep connection with the poor, outcast and marginalized.

And so when Jesus asks Peter “Who do you say that I am?” and Peter answers, “You are the Messiah,” Jesus immediately stops and explains to the disciples that he will undergo great suffering, be rejected by the elders, be killed and in three days rise again. He is defining for them what it actually means to be the Messiah. Jesus wanted to be understood, to be described accurately, to be seen for who he is, to be known.

Like Jesus, we all want to be understood, to be described accurately, to be seen for who we are, to be known.

“Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asked Peter.

“What are you saying about me?” “Who am I?”

Jesus put Peter on the spot.

Now I am going to put you on the spot.

Who do you say that Jesus is? What do you say about Jesus? Who is he to you?

I have used so many descriptors for Jesus in our worship services over the last four years....I have referred to him as our brother, teacher, savior, rabbi and friend to name a few.

Do you relate to Jesus in any of those ways? Do you talk about Jesus? Is he a presence in your life?

Who am I? Jesus asked Peter.

Today I am asking: Who is he to you?

Now I must pause and say that not everyone relates to Jesus. I understand that. One of Christianity's great strengths, in my opinion, is that we have the Trinity: God, the Holy Spirit and Jesus—three distinct and yet undivided parts of a whole. Mysterious but powerful.

And so we can relate to God—as a pulsing energy, or a parent, or a source of love and justice....

And/or we can relate to the Holy Spirit as breath, wind, the stirring in our soul, the flame within us, the still, small voice inside...

And/or we can relate to Jesus, the incarnate being, the man who once walked and preached and touched and healed people with his hands in ancient Israel.

Not everyone relates to Jesus, I know. Some of you relate more to God, some to the Holy Spirit. And of course that is fine. But to be very transparent and honest with you, Jesus is so important in my life and my faith, and I care about you all so deeply that I have a longing, a desire for you to know Jesus, to know Jesus well. I am being very frank about this wish I have for you.

I just want you to know Jesus. I want you to beckon to Jesus, to call to him as your friend, as your brother, as your teacher. For I believe he will come to you, and make his presence known. And you will be strengthened and God will feel near when Jesus is present.

Because you are so dear and precious to me, I want this for you. I want you to have a relationship with Jesus because I know it will enhance your life, give you courage, offer you peace, and fortify your work for justice. I just want this for you.

Jesus asked Peter, Who do you say that I am?

And I am wondering this morning how you would answer that question.

The answers are as numerous as the stars in the heavens.

Jesus, you are a being who lived and died in deep communion with God.

You conquered death and you appear to your followers still as a companion, a guide, a voice to remind us of our best selves, a spirit to bring us closer to God, a teacher and a source of wisdom.

You are a friend and you come when we beckon.

You are a brother, a soul mate, a helpmate in times of trouble.

You are a transforming power and a gentle presence. You are steady, trustworthy, fiery, radical, loving, intense, tender and constant.

Who do people say that I am? Jesus asked Peter.

Who do you say that I am?

What are you saying about me? Who am I?

We have played with all of those questions this morning....we have played with them all.

And it all began with Maggie the cat. She was easy to describe....many of her distinguishing characteristics fit on one flyer.

But it was harder when we wondered: how would we be described by others?

If a short list of words were used to describe you, would “faithful” appear on your list? Would “person of faith” appear on your list? Would “Christian” appear on your list? Why or why not?

Is your faith visible, is it evident in how you live your life?

Is your faith part of how you describe yourself?

Then I asked you how would you describe Jesus?

How would you answer the question Jesus posed to Peter?

What are you saying about me? Who am I?

Each one of you would answer that question differently. And that is fine.

There is of course no one right answer.

I just hope that you do have an answer.

I hope that now or in time you describe Jesus with words that reflect that he is real and present to you, moving through your life, on a journey with you, and available to you as a source of love, support, encouragement and guidance.

What are you saying about me? Jesus asked Peter, and I asked the same question to all of us gathered here today.

Maybe there is no one fixed answer, maybe the answer changes over time, maybe the answer is fluid. Maybe that’s true.

So today, with you as my witnesses, I'll be Peter and I'll have the same dialogue with Jesus.

I'll have Jesus ask me the question.

If Jesus said, Andrea what are you saying about me? Who am I?

Today I would say:

Jesus, you are a Divine Presence, a Holy Being who I am able to see, feel and hear. You guide my life. I thank you for being near. And I love you.

Maybe for today, that is good enough.

Amen.