

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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“Who do YOU say I am?” This is the question that comes to us today in the gospel. A question just as relevant today as it was the first time it was spoken.

If you are like me, you probably first think of the Sunday school answer: “Jesus!” Because that’s the answer to everything, right? Then, you may think about who the CHURCH has said Jesus is over the years- sometimes a tame carpenter from the Middle East, sometimes a radical rebel-rouser challenging an empire. You may also think about how Jesus has impacted YOUR faith and the way you live over the years....

“Who do you say I am?” It isn’t an easy question now, and it wasn’t easy for the disciples either.

When Jesus first posed this question to his disciples, they were in Caesara Phillipi. Remember, the gospel of Matthew was written almost 50-60 years after Jesus’ death, after the Jewish temple would have been decimated in 70BC. To give this scene a deep connection with Matthew’s intended audience, Matthew’s author puts this conversation among a familiar backdrop- at a place where the listeners would have associated with the Romans destroying the Jewish temple because Roman soldiers went THERE, to Caesara Phillipi to celebrate after they had decimated the most

sacred place to their faith community- that is the temple- the very place where God physically and literally resided.¹

And it is there, where, according to Matthew, Jesus challenges his disciples with the question of who he is. The early church would be challenged- knowing how the temple had been destroyed and the cruel pleasure was taken in that by the roman soldiers- what does the person of Jesus, the identity of Jesus- have to say to them in the midst of that violence, and all the chaos and trauma that came with that?

The church today too, stands at a place where nothing is as it was. While our actual buildings have not been destroyed- our faith communities look totally different than they did just five months ago. No more large gatherings, no SINGING together, no taking communion in-person together. It seems that so much of what defined us as a community is gone. As vicar in a new church, I especially feel the absence of these things. This is my fourth week coming to worship in an almost empty sanctuary- 2nd week of preaching in an almost empty sanctuary.

Not only do our faith communities look different- but this nation and this country are facing great upheavals. With the recent murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others- this nation is trying to respond to the systemic injustice and racism built over generations that still allows innocent black and brown individuals to be killed so easily. Depending on how churches act (or don't act), the world will see our answer to the question- who do we say and believe Jesus is?

¹ Thanks to Pastor Jason Glombicki for helping with the wording for this section especially.

When Jesus first asked this question, It was Simon Peter finally musters up the courage to respond, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the **Living** God.” With these words- he confesses that Jesus is God, and he proclaims that GOD LIVES. When you think about the PLACE where this is all taking place- you realize just how radical of a statement it is.

Even though the temple, God’s HOME, has been destroyed and even though their faith has been horribly shaken, the first listeners of this gospel would have heard in Peter’s confession, that God is ALIVE. And ACTIVE. The community that Matthew writes to would have heard: God is STILL present amidst the violence, the destruction, and the complete upheaval of faith and life as they knew it.

[God’s action and our response today]

The texts this morning invite US to ALSO recognize God’s living and active presence, even though we can no longer find God in the places where we normally find or experience God. And we are invited to recognize Jesus for who he is: JESUS is not confined to a brick and mortar building because GOD is not confined to a brick and mortar building.

The texts invite us to find God’s presence in unexpected places. I invite you to look no further than your own hands and feet. For YOU are part of the body of Christ, the living God- whose presence and power goes beyond the church walls.

The past few weeks I’ve had a series of conversations with church members and I’ve witnessed how the people of WPLC have a HUGE array of talents and passions- from writing, music, archeology, architecture, community organizing, baking, biking, education, engineering, coaching,

anti-racism, and MUCH MORE. These are the skills and the passions that bring life and joy to others, that can build community that can empower others that can fight injustice in the world. In the midst of the challenges we are currently facing. Even as we are physically separate.

In the Romans passage, we read an excerpt of a letter from the Apostle Paul to a community of Christians in Rome. He happens to be incarcerated while he writes this letter. So he is **separated** from all members of his community. He can't worship with them, eat with them, or pray with them in person. He can't go to them- EVEN if he wanted to.

The ONLY way he can communicate with them is through his letters. In light of the trouble that the community faced, he urged them that they can STILL use the power and abilities that they DO have to be joined together as ONE body to be transformed and transform the world.

What might this look like? Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. drew on this passage in Romans in a sermon he gave in 1954 in Montgomery Alabama. King urged his audience to be "Transformed non-conformists."² He lists all the ways that he has witnessed people conform- including a lot of people who he says never take a real stand against racial segregation and discrimination for fear of standing alone. He calls on his audience to confess the new life we have in Christ through not conforming to the world around us- especially not being silent in the face of injustice.

King reminds us that more than ever, the world needs individuals who not just can confess in WORD that Christ lives, but that can ALSO use their

² Martin Luther King Jr. "Transformed Non-Conformist," Stanford University, The Martin Luther King Research and Education Institute, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/transformed-nonconformist>

gifts, their passions, and even their place and power in society to take a stand, against racial discrimination. By doing this we too proclaim in word and deed that Christ LIVES and is STILL active in this world.

This morning as we think about **whom do we say Jesus is...** May we learn to think beyond the “easy answers” and may we recognize LIVING GOD in unexpected moments and places. May we proclaim that God is still alive and active as Peter did and may we proclaim this with our actions as well- in all the ways we are and are becoming the body of Christ.

Amen.