

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
"Who Is Jesus? Who Are You?"
Bethany Peerbolte, Director of Youth Ministries
June 14, 2015

Psalm 2, Matthew 16: 13-20

Good morning, I am very excited to be here today and to get the chance to talk to you. For some of you who don't know me I'm Bethany Peerbolte and I am the Director of Youth Ministries at this church. I also am a seminary student at Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit. On the Myer Briggs scale I'm an ENFP and I am happy its finally summer so I can get outside and disc golf again.

Now, that is a really brief look at who I am. There is a lot more back story, a lot more underneath, but I want to talk about the search for who we are. The question of "who am I" is one we as humans wrestle with our whole lives. Phycologist have tried to nail down the answer by developing personality types like Myer Briggs. They say this person is extraverted and this one is introverted, this person is a thinker and that person is a feeler. When I became an inquirer for ministry I had to sit for a 6 hour psychological exam with a barrage of test. With multiple choice answers and sentence answers some written some spoken. The results were a 15 page report about who I am. I'll admit it got some things right, kind of scary right at parts, but do those 15 pages contain a full picture of who I am? I don't think so.

We are obsessed with asking "who am I" in our culture. If you're on Facebook I'll wager a guess that you have taken at least one test to answer the question of "who you are." My friends this week have taken tests titled "which Disney princess are you," "which avenger are you," "which 50's song are you," and "which type of puppy are you." We get see the answers our friends get to these quizzes and we get to share our own answers. All these tests come with a nicely worded answer that no matter who you actually are it comes off as accurate and a huge compliment. I took a quiz to procrastinate writing this sermon, the title of the quiz was "which Starbucks Frappuccino are you." I am the cinnamon roll Frappuccino which says "You're very sweet and absolutely adored by everyone, you're the boss when it comes to hugs and compliments, you're very outgoing and make friends everywhere you go without even trying" Who wouldn't want that to be the answer to who they are? It's a glowing endorsement and all I had to do was answer 5 ridiculous questions. But if I'm completely honest with myself this has very little to say about who I actually am... except that I procrastinate.

Another way we try to figure out who we are or who someone else is is by asking what they do for a living. Graduates, I apologize in advance for the 8000 times you will be asked this summer "what are you going to do after high school." This question is an attempt to get a "who are you" answer. The reason this question comes up is because we think we can figure out the type of person you are by what you will do as a job. Our society first labels us as our job, I'm guilty of doing it 2 minutes ago when I introduced myself. In reality who we are does not stop at what we do for a living, it's not even our hobbies. Graduates, this can be a hard time because for years you have been wrestlers, actors, singers, basketball players. And while you may still do these things they will become less of who you are as an adult. Our faith gets a little closer to who we are but even that can be vague.

A true “who am I” question gets asked at 3am when there is something looming with the sunrise and you have to decide how to respond in 5 hours, 4 hours, 3 hours. “Who are you” gets answered in a split second decision in a crisis or when no one is looking. Are you the type of person who will pick up that trash, are you the type of person who will stop to help someone with a flat tire, are you the type of person who will actually read everything the professor assigns or just skim it and go find the spark notes?

To make things worse the answer to who you are is a moving target. If I asked the 5 year old you “who are you” I would get a different answer than if I asked the teenage you, and still another answer if I asked you now. I may even get a different answer next week. With how much we change in a lifetime it can be hard to really even know who we are at any given moment.

A crisis of self-identity can come at any time, and when we have to rebuild our answer to who we are seeking other’s opinions is valuable input. We find friends and family who know us well, who can remind us of who we are. Faith communities provide a place to seek advice from likeminded people, some who have even suffered the same identity shaking crises. We seek these people out rather than strangers because we know them, we may not know who we are at the moment but we do know them. We have seen them face challenges, we know their advice is good, and we know how they will respond to us. Knowing them helps us remember who we are.

What about God, how often do we check in to see who God says we are? We often forget this option or use it as a last ditch effort to regain identity. It’s so much easier to call someone than it is to slow down and listen for God. Maybe part of our apprehension is that we aren’t sure we know who God is. As Christians we are supposed to use Jesus as the model for who God is. SO the question boils down to who is Jesus? And do we know him well enough to seek him out and trust his advice.

When I went off to college I thought I knew who Jesus was. I had sat in a pew most Sundays of my life, done VBS every summer, Jesus was the ultimate best friend. Jesus is the good guy. But when I got to MSU my image Jesus was challenged. I can remember the moment I asked myself who is Jesus...really?

At any given time of day the Quad at Michigan State is crowded with students. The buildings around the spider web of sidewalks contain the introductory classes. When I went to my first class there was a man in the middle of the sidewalks on a box with a bullhorn. Now, I grew up in a small town. The largest event we had was a craft show, so we did not attract many sidewalk preachers. This was the first one I had met, and as I walked by him I heard some familiar words. Names like Jesus, scriptures I recognized, but intermingled were words like hell and damnation. They were linked to Jesus in a way that confused me. The Jesus this man was yelling about was not the Jesus I had met at VBS. How could two people with the same scriptures come to such different conclusions about who Jesus was? Did I even know Jesus? Had I missed something?

I, luckily, had already found a wonderful church just off of campus and was pleased to find many other students had issues with the Jesus the sidewalk preacher was talking about. I was relieved to hear that who I thought Jesus was, the good guy, was still an option, but the question had been raised. Who is Jesus?

In The NT reading today we find Jesus even asking this question who am I. Jesus has taken his disciples far away from the crowds to decompress. While he's there he decides to check in and see who people are saying he is. He asks who do people say I am? The disciples give Jesus an array of answers. The people say you are John the Baptist, people say you are Elijah others Jeremiah or still others one of the prophets. Essentially the people have picked up that Jesus is one of the great teachers possibly even Elijah who is supposed to come and get people ready for the messiah, but they have missed who Jesus really is.

Have you ever been in a crowded room and someone yells out your name and you turn excited to see a friend and they aren't calling for you, then you get that pit of your stomach. I sense Jesus has a pit in his stomach. Jesus is called all these other people but is not recognized for who he actually is.

But hope is not lost! Those people are just in the crowd here Jesus has his disciples, his closest friends who have heard every word and shared bread with him, who traveled on the road with him, surely they know who he is. So he asks, but what about you! Who do you say I am.....crickets. No one will make eye contact with Jesus, disciples are suddenly really interested in the bread on their plate. If they had iPhones there would have been a sudden alert they HAD to look at.

Then Peter breaks the silence, he says "you are the messiah the son of the living God." Yeah Peter! Jesus must have been relieved.

For the moment Peter has done something none of the other disciples were willing to do. I say for the moment because this is Peter remember this is the same guy who walked on water and then doubted Jesus while standing on the top of a wave. SO he's still got some work to do. But for the moment Peter gets it. How? With the help of God

Jesus points out that Peter could not have come to this understanding on his own. For someone to know who Jesus is takes more than flesh and blood, it is a knowing beyond the eyes and ears and brain. It take the help of God to really know Jesus. Peter didn't phone a friend for the answer or consult a personality test. He slowed down and listened to God and discovered an understanding of who Jesus is.

The blessing that comes next shows us just how important it is to know who Jesus is, because by knowing Jesus Peter gets to see who he is himself. Jesus says that the church will be built around Peter and his understanding. Peter is now a leader, a foundation, a rock! Figuring out who Jesus is will shape who Peter is.

Peter shows us where our foundation of self should begin, with a reflection on who Jesus is. Will we get is wrong? YES, Peter gets is wrong in the very next verse but the blessing of becoming a leader remains. So our first step to shaping who we are should begin with a search of who Jesus is.

That church that helped me when I met my first sidewalk preacher was also the church that sent me on my first mission trip to Mexico. There the answer of who Jesus is took shape for me. Jesus is the one who gives piggy back rides even when your shoulders are burnt right where the kids are holding on. Jesus is the one who gets another load of supplies even though you are sore from head to foot. Jesus is the one who gives water to another even when you are thirsty yourself. Who Jesus is became interwoven with who we were and the work we were doing. It was an understanding of who Jesus is

that inspired us to spend our spring break in Mexico, and not the Cancun Mexico our friends went to. The words of the sidewalk preacher made me embarrassed to be a Christian, but the work in Mexico made me excited to be a Christian. That's when I began to answer who is Jesus and what does that mean for who I am.

This is not to say a fellow Christian won't come up with a different answer to who Jesus is. The sidewalk preacher and I have very different views of who Jesus is, even though we have the same scripture to learn from.

Jesus warns of these conflicting images at the end of our passage today. Right after praising and blessing Peter for saying Jesus is the Messiah Jesus warns the disciples not to go around telling other people he is the Messiah. I always get frustrated when Jesus says this. Isn't that the point Jesus? To tell other people? To be proud of who Jesus is and let the world know Jesus is Messiah. Sure yes, but! We heard a little bit of who people thought the Messiah would be in the OT reading today. If you were paying attention I hope you cringed a little. This psalm is an image of who people thought the messiah would be, a warrior, fighter, and vindicator! The Messiah would vanquish Israel's foes and raise God's people above all others. If the disciples had gone out happily saying Jesus is the messiah many people would automatically associate Jesus with this expected warrior. That was NOT who Jesus was and Jesus did not want that expectation clouding his message.

Words are a great tool but people mistake words to mean things we don't intend. We have all sent an email or text that was read the wrong way and we ended up in trouble. SO how do we take our understanding of who Jesus is and show him to others. If words can be confused how do we ensure the message is clear?

That is when our answer to who we are becomes most meaningful. Because who we are says an enormous amount about who Jesus is. If we take who Jesus is and allow it to shape who we are we can tell anyone about Jesus regardless of language or distance.

This is when John usually gives a challenge but since I work with teens I give them homework.

Seek God's help in figuring out who Jesus is this week. I read a quote from a monk that said "spend 20 minutes a day with God. Except if you're busy. If you're busy spend an hour with God. Ask this week who is Jesus then take that understanding and make it the foundation for who you are in the world. May you go from here seeking a deeper understanding of who Jesus is and may that understanding lead to the blessing of knowing who you are yourself.