

“Who Do You Say that I Am?”
The Rev. Lauren McDonald
Bruton Parish Church, Williamsburg, VA
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Matthew 16:13-20

Deacon Jan and I have had the privilege and pleasure this summer of facilitating a Sacred Ground group. Sacred Ground is a film-based dialogue series on race and faith. It’s part of *Becoming Beloved Community*, the Episcopal Church’s long-term commitment to racial healing, reconciliation, and justice in our personal lives, our ministries, and our societies. In addition to watching films for each session, we read selections from articles and books. One of the assigned books is *Jesus and the Disinherited*, by Howard Thurman, who was an African American writer, philosopher, theologian, and educator, as well as a Baptist preacher and a social and civil rights activist. If you’re not familiar with Howard Thurman, I invite you to look him up. You might be familiar with his poem, *The Work of Christmas*.

In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, published in 1949, Thurman examines “the religion of Jesus against the background of his own age and people” (p. 5). He’s looking for what Jesus has to say to those whose backs are against the wall, to those who are in need of “profound [comfort] and strength,” to those who are familiar with persecution and suffering. He does this by looking at who Jesus was and what Jesus taught the people of his time.

Thurman reminds us that Jesus was a Jew of 1st century Palestine and must be understood within that community’s relationship with God.

Jesus was also *poor* Jew. Along with the masses of people of his time.

He was a member of a minority group in the midst of the dominant and controlling force of Rome.

The desire of Jewish people living under the occupation of the Romans was to be free of their oppressors. Liberated from foreign rule.

Thurman argues that the Jewish minority in this situation, had two choices for their response to those in control – resistance or nonresistance. For those who chose nonresistance, Thurman describes how some imitated or assimilated, choosing to become like the oppressor so as not to be destroyed by the oppressor. Those choosing this path, like Herod and the Sadducees, may have loved Israel, but they loved security and their position more. Other groups, like the Pharisees, chose isolation from the oppressor, keeping their contempt and resentment under control, while holding on to their cultural identity. It was a very tenuous balance.

The Zealots of Jesus' time chose the path of resistance, sometimes armed resistance, however futile it may have been. The idea was that it's better to die fighting for freedom than to live life in bondage.

But Jesus had a different way. He taught a way of survival for his followers that was not assimilation or cultural isolation. Nor was it armed resistance. Thurman says Jesus' message focused on changing the inner attitude of the people. Jesus "recognized fully that out of the heart are the issues of life and that no external force, however great and overwhelming, can at long last destroy a people if it does not first win the victory of the spirit against them (11). Jesus "announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of

the disinherited, need have no dominion over them” (p. 19). Jesus taught that, “The kingdom of God is within.”

So, we have this man, Jesus, a poor Jew living in a minority culture under an oppressive regime, teaching a way for his people to survive that doesn't involve violence or loss of their culture and faith. This is the man that the disciples are following. Son of a carpenter, itinerant teacher, offering a liberating way of being in the world no matter what the circumstances.

And, this poor Jewish teacher is doing some pretty remarkable things like healing, walking on water, feeding the masses with very little food, and calming storms. It's no wonder the disciples are a little unclear about what it all means.

Jesus asks them who other people are saying he is. “Well, some folks think that you might be John the Baptist. Others think you're one of the old-time prophets like Jeremiah or Elijah.” The disciples have heard some wild theories.

Jesus turns to them and says directly, “Okay. But who do *you* say that I am?” You, who have been following me, listening to what I teach, witnessing what I do. Who am I to you?

In a flash of divine insight, Peter blurts out, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” You are the anointed one, the Christ, the liberator. You're not just a prophet, but God among us. You are God with us.

Yes indeed, Peter. In that moment of grace, Peter knows Jesus, not by his own analysis, but because God has revealed it to him.

About that moment Bishop Jake Owensby writes, “Jesus was asking about relationship. And that’s how Peter answered. He recognized Jesus as his Messiah. His Savior. And you really only recognize a liberator when you yearn to be released from your own captivity.

“To put this another way, Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answered, “You are the one who loves me. And you’ve given me the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven: The power to love.”¹

Jesus’ message is clear to those who are yearning to be free. He is God with us, in the midst of anything that holds us captive, the one who will set us free from whatever binds us. The one who sets us free to love.

But what if we don’t see him as a liberator? Jesus’ message can be hard to understand for people in the majority. For people who have wealth or status or power over others. For people whose circumstances of birth have given them tail winds toward success, people who believe that they’ve earned or deserve everything they have, people whose skin color or gender or nationality or religion or sexual orientation is the dominant one, privilege and freedom are as invisible as the air they breathe. From what do they need liberating?

¹ <https://jakeowensby.com/2020/08/21/the-power-of-love/>

What Howard Thurman and Bishop Jake and Peter all recognize is the truth of who Jesus is and how much we need him. Of course the disinherited and the oppressed need this message of liberation – it enables them to survive. But the Romans needed the message too. And Herod and the Sadducees and the Pharisees and the Zealots. Systems of oppression bind the oppressor and the oppressed alike. Jesus came to unbind all of us from all of that, to set the captives free. None of us are free unless all of us are free.

Just because we all need the message doesn't mean we will all listen to the message and put our whole trust in the one who brings it.

Peter placed his trust in Jesus, the Messiah, the liberator, the Savior. And Jesus placed his trust in Peter, an imperfect vessel to be sure as are we all, but one whose foundation rested on God.

In whom do we place our trust?

Imagine that Jesus is with you right now. He turns to you with his piercing brown eyes and holds your gaze and asks, "Who do you say that I am?"

What will you answer?