

**12 Pentecost
August 30, 2017**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

“Who do you say that I am?” This is the question that Jesus puts to his disciples. Simon Peter, always the impetuous one, replied, “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.”

I believe that this is a seminal time in the life and ministry of Jesus. All summer long we’ve heard stories of Jesus healing, telling parables, doing miracles and then last week he went all the way northwest to the territory of Trye and Sidon on the Mediterranean coast in what is now Syria. He was outside of his Jewish homeland. Then this week he has traveled from there, back into northern Israel, to Caesarea Philippi. I believe Caesarea Philippi is a watershed point for Jesus. It is at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus asked his disciples who others thought he might be. It is at Caesarea Philippi that he asked his disciples the question, “Who do you say that I am?” It is at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus offered the paradox: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” It was on a nearby mountain that Jesus was transfigured. And it was at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus set his sights on Jerusalem and began the journey that would end in his crucifixion. At Caesarea Philippi Jesus literally turned a corner and headed south to his ultimate destination.

Caesarea Philippi is the site of the head waters of the Jordan River. The water comes forth from a spring in the side of a mountain and swells to become the river in which Jesus was baptized. The gospels make no connection between Jesus’ baptism and his visit to Caesarea Philippi, yet the coincidence seems very noteworthy to me. That all these questions about the identity of Jesus arise in this place, just before Jesus began his journey to Jerusalem, feels significant.

Of course, the question of the identity of Jesus has never been fully resolved. The question has divided the church many times in its history... and it continues to divide the church. “Who do you say that I am?” is not just a question that Jesus put to his disciples at this crucial time in his ministry. It is also a question for each one of us today: “Who do you say that Jesus is?” And, more personally, if you were to ask this of yourself, “Who do you say you are?”

The Church says that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. But that both answers some questions and raises others. Was Jesus a divine part of the godhead from the creation of the universe as the author of John’s gospel asserts? Or, was Jesus divine

from his conception by the Holy Spirit as Matthew and Luke uphold in their nativity stories? Or, did Jesus receive his divinity at his baptism as Mark implies? Maybe they are all true. Or, maybe there is another answer.

Some may say that we are dealing with semantics, but it is just those semantics that divided the Church into the Roman Catholic Church in the west and the Orthodox Church in the east in 1054. It was this issue, among others, that caused the proliferation of Protestant denominations following the Reformation. And it is this issue, among others, that contributes to what still divide the Christian faith today into its many expressions.

Is there a “right” answer to the question Jesus asked: “Who do you say I am?” Yes! Absolutely! The right answer is the one that makes your faith alive for you and brings wholeness to your relationship with God. Is your answer to that question the “right” one for the person sitting next to you in the pew? Not necessarily.

As I have said before, I see Jesus as the ultimate choice-maker. From leaving his hometown of Nazareth, to his baptism in the Jordan River, to his 40 days in the wilderness tempted by the devil Jesus was making choices ... choices about living God’s will for him in his life. He chose humility over honor; challenge over conformity; compassion over apathy. He chose to live by the intent of God’s laws even if it wasn’t always the letter of the Torah. He chose a life with many risks that he faced with courage, rather than a life of safety lived in fear. He chose life, even when it led him to the cross.

When Jesus asked, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” and “Who do you say that I am?” I believe he was also asking himself, “Who am I and what does this mean?” The answers he received to this last question affirmed his life and mission, and it led him to set his face towards Jerusalem.

Today we face the question: “Who do you say Jesus is?” And I don’t see this as a question that is intended to distinguish us, or separate us, from others with different answers. This isn’t about aligning ourselves with one faith expression or another. Rather it is a question to be lived with. If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously then we too will be faithful choice-makers. Each time we ask the question about Jesus, we are also asking the question about ourselves: “Who do I say that I am?” Can I learn to live with the question the way the Jesus may have lived with the question? Can I be faithful to living God’s will for me in my life? Can I ask the question about Jesus, affirm him the way that Simon Peter did, and at the same time find some of those same qualities expressed in my own life?

How do we answer that question for ourselves in times like this? When Kim Jong-un threatens a nuclear attack on the United States, and President Trump responds with his own threats, I feel very small, and the question of “Who do I say that I am?” seems

insignificant. When events like Charlottesville and its repercussions occur I'm left confused ... I am morally outraged by people flying Nazi flags and using terror tactics in a nation founded on the principle "that all men are created equal." However, I see a much larger picture of racial injustice which events like Charlottesville are just a small part. In cases like this the question of "Who do I say that I am?" seems almost irrelevant.

But if Jesus could ask the question facing what he was facing, and if I take seriously what Jesus took seriously, then I am compelled to ask the question. It may not give me immediate answers in face of the larger issues of world or national policy ... or even those in our hometown. But I cannot be apathetic ... I cannot avoid the question ... I cannot stand on the sidelines. I may have to live in a tension between two opposing forces ... and it may be uncomfortable ... but it seems to me that is what being a choice-maker is about.

Who do I say that I am? I am the Rev. Ted Voorhees ... Father Ted ... Vicar and Pastor of St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church in the historic Lincolnvillle neighborhood of St. Augustine, Florida. St. Cyprian's is a historically African American congregation formed when people of color ... because of the Jim Crow racial segregation norms of the times ... could not worship at the white Episcopal Church downtown. St. Cyprian's was built in 1900 with the "generous" help of a white woman from Trinity Parish downtown. St. Cyprian's has existed for over a century because of the "generous" assistance of the Diocese of Florida and "generous" gifts from Trinity Parish. That "generous" support allowed the Episcopalians who were not white to continue to worship at St. Cyprian's ... and white Episcopalians to worship at Trinity Parish ... and it "allowed" the continued racial segregation of the people of St. Augustine. And it does not escape me that I am a white pastor of a historically black church. And I will not deny that I am the product of white privilege.

Lincolnvillle is currently going through significant gentrification with most of the new and renovated housing being occupied by white people in what was the historic African American neighborhood. That is because much of the original housing stock was ... and in some places still is ... "blighted." This is consequence of the payback from the white power base in St. Augustine ... a white power base that has been in place since the founding of this city. Following the Civil Rights demonstrations in the 1960s homeowners could not get loans to make needed repairs; young men and women could not find employment and so they moved elsewhere; Florida Memorial College ... the only alternative for post-secondary education for African Americans in the area ... lost its support of the white businesses and moved to Miami, thus black students wanting to go to college had to leave the city. These are all consequences of a lingering Jim Crow culture of white superiority. And that is why this once proud black community is now filled with white people. And, yes, I live in Lincolnvillle. And, yes, I know I am part of the problem.

I am white, and I am a product of white privilege. But I am also the Vicar and Pastor of St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church. That is a great honor. However, it also comes with a great responsibility to all those of our spiritual ancestors who worshiped in this place for over a century before I arrived. So, the question "Who do you say I am?" is more than a philosophical query ... it is a mandate to do something. At tomorrow's City Commission meeting the agenda includes a place for citizens to speak regarding the monuments to those who fought in the Civil War. I plan to be one of the speakers.

I would dare say that most of those who desire to keep the monuments remembering the Confederate States in our downtown are the recipients of white privilege. White people of European descent have been the power base of St. Augustine ... political, financial, and social ... since its founding. However, in an era when poverty affects a disproportionate number of people of color; and when our jails and prisons are filled with African Americans; and where gerrymandering of voting districts steals the power of the Black vote; and when voter ID laws, and restrictions on voting rights makes it more difficult for poor people to vote it is time for things to change. St. Augustine prides itself in being the first city in the nation. Now is time for it again to be first ... or at least among the first. It is time for these symbols of the continuing prejudice and discrimination in today's society to be removed ... they have out lived their purpose.

The City Commissioners of St. Augustine have an opportunity to not just remove these monuments to alleviate the controversy, but to make a bold statement to the world ... that the Nation's Oldest City stands for equality for all its citizens. This isn't just about the Civil War and remembering those who fought in it. Nor is it about those who feel offended by these symbols carved in stone. It is about where the City of St. Augustine goes from here. Will the oldest continually occupied European settlement in what is now the United States respect and champion its place as being first, or will it continue to be pulled backwards by its history? We owe it to all our citizens ... regardless of the color of their skin, or the name of the God they worship, or their educational or economic status ... we owe it to all our citizens to have them know that in the eyes of the people of St. Augustine we are all equal ... that the color of our skin is not what defines who and what we are.

We do not have to destroy these monuments. We cannot change our history. But I believe that the monuments should not be on our public plaza. I will encourage the City Commission to remove the monument to the fallen Confederate soldiers from the Plaza to a more appropriate place. I will further encourage the City Commission to request the University of Florida to remove the monument to General William Wing Loring to a more appropriate placement.

Finally, I will commit my personal resources, and the resources of St. Cyprian's Episcopal Church to civil conversations about race relations in the nation's Oldest City.

And so this morning we face the question: "Who do I say that I am?" Can I learn to live with the question the way the Jesus may have lived with the question? Can I be faithful to living God's will for me in my life? Can I ask the question about Jesus, affirm him the way that Simon Peter did, and at the same time find some of those same qualities expressed in my own life? Can I be all that God made me to be? If I am honest with myself, can I ask the question "Who do I say I am?" and live with the answer?

Amen.

