

Two things you might want to know about me from the start. First off, just about anything that gets my attention usually reminds me of a song. So this question, “who do you say?” made me think of an old Bill Withers song: *Who is he, and what is he to you?* “Daggumit, *Who is he, and what is he to you?*” Love that “daggumit.” What is he to you?” This seems to me to be the heart of the matter. . .

The other thing is, before answering a question like this I tend to ask a lot of questions *about* the question. That can drive people crazy, but bear with me. Just what *is* the question? Unfortunately, our English translations don't do it justice, for what the text says is not “who do *you* say.” It's “who do *y'all* say I am?” You don't need to know Greek to figure this out; it's obvious he's talking to his disciples, a chosen few who've been with him day in and day out, who've also been given special instruction in the Sermon on the Mount. Not sure how that changes things, but I suspect it does. For one thing, there's this “but” before the question: “But who do y'all say...?” This could be a big “but.” Maybe Jesus hopes their response will be different from what “people” are saying. I don't know.

What *isn't* the question? It's not who do you say Jesus *was*, even if we can't avoid thinking about who he was to say who he is. Jesus has a history, and he is part of a history. So here I'll venture a partial answer to who Jesus was, which wouldn't have occurred to his disciples but that *must* occur for me. Jesus was a Jew. He never stopped being a Jew, and for all I know he still is. We can never know everything about the “real” or “historical” Jesus. But if we forget or minimize the fact that a Jew (and a “hick” Jew at that) is the one we call “Lord”—we *know* this has had gruesome results. The very word “messiah” is rooted in centuries of Israel's history. Apart from this history, Jesus is unintelligible (or worse) for Christians. We will turn Jesus into some kind of blond haired superhero of our own design.

This isn't the first time I've been asked to talk about Jesus' identity. I've written papers about it, have stood before judicatory bodies to be examined about my beliefs, my orthodoxy, if I checked enough of the right boxes about the Trinity, etc. My thoughts have evolved, to be sure. At this point, questions about Jesus' “divinity”—traditionally the main concern regarding Jesus' identity—no longer interest me. Attributes of “divinity” we ascribe to Jesus tend to presume we know more than we do about what the “divine” can be. More important now for me is the affirmation that Jesus was—and in a way still is—fully human.

So back to the question: who do you say that I am? I have another question about that question: who's asking? Who wants to know; who cares? Some of y'all, anyway, I'd hope. But it may be beside the point—that is, if it's Jesus himself who's asking. If it's Jesus *himself*, things change. Then it won't matter what others think, or what y'all think, if the Presbyterians give a hoot (apparently not). And as I read and ponder this text, I can't get away from the obvious: it is *still* Jesus who's asking. Jesus who asks *me*: “Who am I, and what am I to *you*?” Dagummit. Now, Jesus gets up close and personal.

Jesus *was* asking his disciples, but under acutely different circumstances from ours. Peter could say “you are the Messiah,” and have some idea what that meant. It would be impossible for me to say and mean the same thing. I'm not a first century Jew living under military occupation, in a volatile hotbed of religious fervor. It's instructive that Jesus doesn't want the “Messiah” title to go public; a few verses later he *sternly orders* his guys: Don't tell *anyone*! Jesus will be anything *but* what they think the messiah will be. Now, if I can't truly say the same as Peter, at least one thing is clear. I need to be very *careful* throwing words around about Jesus without his permission.

As I suggested, it's hardly possible to consider the question of who Jesus *is* without thinking of who Jesus *was*, or better, *how* Jesus was, in the stories passed down to us. And yet, it's not enough. Not enough to live on, anyway. Jesus asks me “Who am I *now*, still *alive*, and what am I *now* to you?”

Unable to come up with a concise answer, I decided to make a list. It's not complete, but it describes who Jesus is to me, what he means to me; different ways in different times. Naturally it can't help but include my memories: all Jesus has been and done for me, as well as who he continues to be.

Jesus is the one whose face I see when I pray to God. At times like Rembrandt painted him. His image is sort of blurred, but it's clear he's not white like me. He's still a Galilean Jew. He listens when I pray. He prays *with* me.

Now, pastors are supposed to pray, and I've done my share. But I didn't really get serious about prayer until I got desperate. To make a *very* long story short, at one time I was a hopeless, helpless drunk. A slave to the bottle. Hardly anyone outside my family even knew, and I got good at keeping secrets. The shame of secrecy tightened my chains. Finally I cried out for help, and God rescued me. But putting down the drink was only the beginning; I had to learn to be freed from bondage to *self*. Which, to begin with, meant learning how to beg. So, who is Jesus? He is the one who pulled me up out of hell

and raised me from the dead. It's been a few decades, but not a day goes by that I don't remember and give thanks for that. Jesus is still the one who walks with me and talks with me. He has shown me and still shows me—as a work in progress—what it means to be truly free. It's an inside job.

So I can say this: Jesus is Emmanuel: God with us. God with us and *for* us. But not as in “God on our side,” or just my side, even as he stands by my side. God with us: how can I begin to count the ways? Lately I've come to see how Jesus presents himself to me as a victim: *our* victim, even, *my* victim. Jesus is the one I have ignored, abandoned, denied, just like Peter. Jesus is the one hanging from the lynching tree. My people did this. At times this is the Jesus who haunts me, whose gaze I can't avoid, if I'm honest. And this victim is also the Jesus who returns to me and says: “Peace be with you.” Who forgives me for my complicity in all that has wounded him, and still wounds him. This is also the Jesus I see, when I can bear to look.

And at the risk of theologizing in public, I can say in response to our question: Jesus is the one True Human, the complete human; the new Adam, the prototype for all humanity. Or, less jargon, Jesus is the One who shows me what it means to be fully human. This is to accept creaturely existence as it is, with all its limits, in gratitude to God; to be God's creature without aspiring to be God or play god. And yet also capable of reflecting the glory of God, sharing the unconditional love of God, trusting in the abundance of God. He teaches me not to try to be more than human, or less than human. To be, as Jackson Browne says, “alive in the world.” I used to be half-alive; I'm learning to be fully alive. Jesus shows me that this is humanly possible, even for a sinner like me. That's who I say Jesus *is*.

This is the Jesus who welcomes me, after all I've done and left undone, to break bread with him, and with all y'all—and then some. We can break bread in the presence of our enemies, as well as friends, without fear. With that great cloud of witnesses who've gone before us, who surround us with hope. We gather with the wounds of our host still visible, who smiles at us and says: “This is my body...”