

President Ulysses S. Grant once was on his way to attend a dinner reception being offered in his honor. As he went, it began to rain, and Grant opened his umbrella. When he came across a stranger who seemed to be going the same way he was, he offered to share his umbrella with the man. As they walked, they talked about this and that, and eventually they discovered they were both going to the same banquet. It was then that the stranger confessed that he was only going to the dinner out of "curiosity." Lowering his voice, the man said, "Between us, I've always thought that President Grant was a much overrated man." To which the unrecognized President replied, "That is my view also." We enjoy talking about others. But we don't like to get caught, do we?

But man, do we have opinions. Name a president. Or, how about the kid's teachers, the auto mechanic, the coach, the next-door neighbor, the checkout person at the grocery store, the preacher in the pulpit. We have opinions, and in the right setting, we let those opinions fly.

Now, if we're prepared to have an opinion about all the regular people around us, it would be surprising if we didn't have an opinion about Jesus. More than any other person, Jesus has changed the way the world thinks, the way humanity lives. I realize even that statement is an opinion, and if we were online and this was the comments section, there would be people telling me how stupid I was to say something like that; how great it is to hear someone honoring Jesus that way; there would be sarcasm; irreverent images would be posted, along with affirmations of faith, because everyone has an opinion about Jesus.

Listen to some of the names Jesus was called during His short, three-year period of ministry. He was labeled the "Lamb of God," the "Carpenter's Son. " He was called a teacher, a devil, a deceiver, a sinner, the Savior. He was considered to be a wine drinker, possessed by the devil, a blasphemer, a rebel, and the Christ.

That last one, "the Christ," was what Peter said to Him the day Jesus asked, "Who do you say I am?" It's very intriguing to see Jesus checking in with his disciples this way, especially since they were near Caesarea Philippi, which, shall we say, was a party town. Against the backdrop of a town where you could choose just about any false god imaginable, Jesus puts the question to His students. "Who do you say I am?" And Peter, who had a way of "fumbling the ball," actually gets this one right, for the moment. What Peter meant by calling Jesus the Christ—the Anointed One of God—would become clear soon enough, and it sure didn't include a cross. But that didn't change the fact that he was right; Jesus was the Christ; the one to fulfill all prophecy.

It's a question that won't go away: Jesus asking, "Who do you say I am?" What do you think about Jesus? There are three main ways a person can answer. The first two ways are simple: either, you are led to faith in Jesus as your Savior, or you reject Him. In Jesus' day, many of the priests, who had a vested interest in the status quo, rejected Him. Many of the political activists, looking for a political deliverer, also wanted nothing to do with Him. The Roman government, which, by then, had proclaimed its emperors to be living gods, wanted no competition from the Prince of Peace. Other religions, such as those who worshipped Diana in Ephesus, found their income and authority being reduced by the Savior. All of these opposed Jesus and His work of buying people back from the grip of evil.

On the other hand, there were those who found their answers in the risen Savior. Jesus said that would happen. He had said that He had come to seek and save the lost; to be the Light for those who were wandering blindly in the darkness; to be a doctor for those whose souls were sick. Back then, just as today, faith in Jesus says to all who believe, that death does not have the last word. Faith in Jesus says there is forgiveness from sin, and with that forgiveness, a new eternal life of joy with Jesus. If forgiveness and eternity were all Jesus gave to sick souls, it would be enough. No one could expect any more.

But there is more. Years ago a grandpa was taking a walk with his grandson. They had no special destination; they just walked and talked. With a smile, grandpa asked, "How far are we from home?" The boy answered, "Grandpa, I don't know." Then Gramps asked, "Do you know where you are?" The boy answered, "no." To which grandpa observed, "Sounds to me like you're lost." The boy disagreed. He looked up and said, "Nope, grandpa, I can't be lost. I'm with you." We can't be lost when we're with Jesus. In times of sadness, He brings hope. When friends have betrayed us, He has promised to stand by our side. When no one else will give us the time of day, Jesus has promised to hear our prayers.

Now there is a third way people see and talk about Jesus. It begins with one simple thought: people aren't sinners. A lot of people buy that idea. And, it follows that if you don't have sin, you don't need a Savior. As a result, people have concluded that Jesus is fine, but He's not a Savior, and certainly not God-in-the-flesh. Now that's an answer with spiritual ramifications to be sure; but it's also an answer that leads to a number of practical difficulties. In other words, because our culture has dumped the concept of sin, it is at a loss when it comes to dealing with the problems that sin creates. Yet at the same time our culture can't stop telling stories about a King who will come to put things right; Heroes who lay down their lives sacrificially; Chosen Ones who will fight against the darkness for the rest of us. We may want to let the idea of sin go, but we don't want to let those stories go. Why is that? Because deep inside, we know we need to be rescued. We know we're not strong enough to get out on our own. That's why it is crucial for the Christian Church to keep telling the story—the true story—of Jesus, both to ourselves, and to our culture. Walking through Lent in our approach to Holy Week is bringing this right to the forefront. What you and I and all people need to experience is the story of this man, Jesus, willingly, valiantly entering into the city of His Father, being unjustly tried and sentenced, mercilessly flogged and beaten, spit on and mocked, and finally, nailed to a cross, crucified like a criminal, and, all the while, praying for forgiveness would be extended to all humanity. Jesus dies this death to prevent you from dying this death. He walks into the executioner's chamber so that you don't have to. A Roman centurion who watched all this happen came to the conclusion, without being asked: "This man really was the Son of God."

So who do you think Jesus is?

February 25, 2018 + Second Sunday in Lent

St. Mark Lutheran Church, Chesterland, Ohio

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