

Who do people say that the Son of Man is? Jesus asks his followers in today's Gospel from Matthew.

Now I imagine if Jesus hired an image consultant today to answer that question, he might get something like this: Well Jesus, a media analysis indicates that many say you're white. And a lot of them say that you have big problems with people who don't practice a Christian faith. Still others say you have low tolerance for many kinds of people including members of the LGBTQ community, undocumented immigrants, people who can't get themselves out of poverty. And a very influential segment say you will make your followers to be rich.

And I can imagine Jesus saying: Hmmm. They don't know me very well, do they?

Maybe that's why in the Gospel Jesus then asks his followers a more important question: And who do You say that I am?

Who do You say that Jesus is? And how do you know?

The question reminds me of a moment in the story of the Rough Faced Girl. It's an Algonquin story retold by Rafe Martin that is a sort of Cinderella story. The Rough Faced girl is this despised younger sister whose face is deformed by tending the family fires. Meanwhile, all the women in the village – including her two nasty older sisters -- are vying to marry the Invisible Being who lives nearby. But to do that you have to accurately tell his sister what he looks like. And none of the haughty people in the village can describe the Invisible Being because they've never seen him because you know....

Except for the Rough Faced girl, who has seen the Invisible Being in the rainbow and the stars and the pretty much everywhere she looked. And in turn the Invisible Being sees her for what she is -- beautiful to the core, and they will never be parted.

Who do You say I am? Jesus asks his followers. And Simon Peter gives an answer much like the one the Rough Face Girl gave. Because their answers come from the same source – a deep desire and graced ability to recognize the Divine One. A gift of seeing that comes from the Unseen One alone.

This is the gift of faith – the faith that makes the invisible God visible, that allows Peter to say correctly who Jesus is – this is the bone-deep recognition that the Divine presence is all around.

When that happens in the Scriptures, things get real. Names get changed. In the Hebrew Bible a change of name means a change of destiny -- as when Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai becomes Sarah. And a childless couple becomes the parents of God's people.

So Jesus essentially says to Simon: You call me *Christos*, the anointed one, because of your faith in me. Because of my faith in you, I call you *Petros*, the Rock. And upon that rock, I will build my *Ekklesia*. In the Greek *Ekklesia* means people who are called out, called together, assembled -- as in a political gathering or a Synagogue or a Christian House Church.

St. Peter's *Ekklesia*. That's our name.

As heirs of Peter's faith, we are called out to be in this place today, not as individuals sharing a similar experience of a private God. We are gathered here as *Ekklesia*, a community assembled by God.

The Apostle Paul does us a great favor by describing church less as a stone structure than a living body. Savor this image from today's passage from Romans: "So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another."

Individually we are members one of another.

Hidden in the Gospel today, is a question that Jesus has for us, a question that is very much connected to the question "Who do people say I am?" And that is: "Who do people say You are?"

Because this is how God has chosen to make the Divine-self visible in the world -- through people who are members one of another. This is the key to the Kingdom of God: our willingness to make the love of God and the desire of God more visible to a world that has been told a lot of lies about who Jesus is.

And that means that not just as individuals, but as *Ekklesia*, as church, we must oppose those who would do evil in Jesus' name -- from practicing white supremacy, bigotry and discrimination, to everyday tolerations of social violence and inequity and degradations of creation. It means we have to recognize that tendency in our lives and make our own amends.

And it means we have to be able to proclaim not only what Jesus is **not**, but who Jesus **is**.

This is not without consequences, as Peter will find out next week when Jesus announces that he will face suffering and death at the hands of religious authorities in Jerusalem. There are times when the stakes of speaking out as *Ekklesia* are high. Six years ago St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Ambler put out a sign calling for people to resist white supremacy. The pastor Rachel Anderson received death threats.

At the time Pastor Rachel Anderson suggested that in addition to supporting her congregation, people might also visit, get to know, and make a gift to their local mosque,

synagogue, or church. “Most of us aren't getting death threats,” she said. “But many of us are, and we need all the community support we can muster to stand against hate.’

That was six years ago. How much more is the risk now to those who speak out against hatred in the name of the Christ, who call themselves Ekklesia, or Church?

Who do people say that We are? Who do they say that St Peter’s is? I got an email from a nearby parish earlier this summer asking for advice about inclusion because they saw our rainbow flag hanging on the front of our church. Who do people say that we are because we have a banner that says “All Are Welcome in this Place?” Who do people who have visited or stopped by say who we are?

Later today 10 of us will be taking fliers about our Community Rally Day and Open House out to our neighbors to personally invite them to come to the event on Sept. 10<sup>th</sup> to get to know who St Peter’s is, who our partners and tenants are, who we all are as a community. Who will people say that we are as a result of the effort, the day and our ongoing presence in the community?

As Church, the keys that we have been handed are the keys that let love loose in the world, and that bind evil so that it loses its power to lead. It is not our gift to determine who is let in and who is kept out of the Kingdom of God. God will mind those gates.

Which frees us to be more visible and more audible as the Body of Christ that we are called and gifted to be.

So that when Jesus asks us: Who do people say that I am, and who do people say that You are, the answer will be largely the same.

Amen.