

Year A, Proper 16
Exodus 1:8-2:10
Psalm 124
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:13-20

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Every now and then, someone will say to me something like “You’re so different when we’re you’re in a social situation or visiting one on one than you are when you’re in a meeting or in church on Sunday.” Or “I wish people would take time to get to know you as you really are—they would like you.” Last week in a local doctor’s office, I ran into a young mother from our church there with her husband and their young child. I wasn’t wearing my collar, and as I talked with the child, I wondered if he might have been confused because we were outside our normal context. His mother commented that it was good to see me in a different situation, and I appreciate her for noticing that like all of you, I have to go to the doctor and the grocery store, and even Walmart, and my life is multi-dimensional like yours. Just as there is more to you than your presence here and your participation in parish activities, there’s more to me than my vocation and the clothes I wear as I do the work of the church. In more ways than you might imagine, I’m a lot like you. You’ll have to decide whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing.

Human beings are a lot alike. We behave and appear differently in different situations, like work and play, and inside or outside our homes. While I would never compare myself to Jesus, I think there’s a pretty good possibility that life was the same for him. Most of what we know about him involves his public image, the person seen by the crowds that followed him, who went to great trouble to hear him and significant effort to speak to him. The public Jesus was often embroiled in bitter conflict with the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes, taking a stand against laws and restrictions he believed were inappropriate or made it difficult to people to approach God. He regularly sat at table with heathens and undesirables, regardless of how he was criticized for it. As his public self, as far as we know it, he said what he thought needed to be said without compunction, never seeming to second-guess himself, and giving absolutely no concern to what others thought of it. Brave man! I do wish I could be more like him! In every way...

Just as we have public images and behaviors, we also have a private side. That’s the one where we feel safe being ourselves, where we relax with friends and family we know we can trust, even when they speak truth to us about things hard for us hear. These are folks we know to care about us without judging us, forgiving us even when we’ve done something stupid, or careless, or foolish. In our private side we can risk being vulnerable—but it *is* a risk, so we may be very careful about who we allow to see us that way. Let’s imagine that Jesus also had a private side. Occasionally we catch glimpses of it in his interactions with his disciples, and when he’s with friends—like Lazareth, Mary and Martha. Unfortunately this private Jesus is the one we know the least about. We know practically nothing about his childhood or even about his family except for Mary, Joseph and James. I remember being cautioned in seminary not to place feelings and emotions into scripture, but I wonder if doing that might help us grow closer to Jesus and allow us to be more accepting of his humanity.

Since the eighteenth century, probably even before then, scholars have spent much time studying and writing to fill in the gaps of Jesus’ life so we can understand more about his human side and the times and cultures he experienced. We can find factual information in the studies of many who have searched for the historical Jesus, from Albert Schweitzer to the 150 scholars of the Jesus Seminar. In 2002, Christopher Moore wrote a national bestseller called *Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ’s Childhood Pal*. It’s fiction, of course, sometimes humorous, and absolutely controversial. Whether you find the information about the historical Jesus interesting or shocking, it does help remove the box Christians have formed to hold him captive to our own needs over the past two thousand years. This is the box that often identifies him as a thin white man, fair of complexion with beautiful long, light brown hair and blue eyes, a manly man who is “financially secure, and endlessly religious” whatever the circumstances. Even *The Shack*, the book-now-movie which portrays God as a big black woman and the Holy Spirit as a small but lively Asian woman,

portrays Jesus in a familiar way, an expert handyman wearing a plaid shirt and using the carpenter's tools. Surely there's more to him than that!

You may not find this way of thinking about Jesus interesting, or helpful, and you may even find it frightening and risky, but we can use it to help us understand the two questions he asked the disciples in today's gospel. "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" This question wasn't about whether people liked him or not. Through the gospels, we know the religious and government authorities weren't too smitten with him. But the crowds that followed him, the people he healed, fed and taught—they loved him. Unless a person is totally oblivious, he can figure out fairly easily how another feels about him. But Jesus is asking who people say he is, and that's different. In those days, many men who claimed to be *the* Messiah traveled the countryside with their own followers and agendas. Maybe Jesus wanted to know if he stood out among the others, and whether his message was being received as real and true. The disciples told him that many believed he was holy and sent by God, but they did not identify him as the Messiah.

The conversation shifts, and he asks his friends, the men who know the private Jesus, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter, the spokesman for us all, answers, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." He may not have been relieved himself, but I can be relieved for him. Affirmation feeds the human spirit, especially when it concerns what is most important to us. Maybe even when the human *is* the Son of the Living God, and is also divine.

Just as Jesus asked these questions of his disciples, he surely asks them of us. Who do you say Jesus is? This isn't a question of what the creeds say or what orthodox doctrine maintains. This is about you and him. Is he your teacher? Your brother and friend? Your pastor and confessor? Is he your Lord and Master (and if so, what exactly does that mean to you)? Do you rely on insights from personal study and private prayer and meditations to know who Jesus is? Do you identify him primarily through what you've been taught and told? Do you—do we, as Christians—just design our own Jesus, to conform to our own needs and expectations, and maybe also to the limits of the power we give him in our lives? Our answers are as different and as complex as we are as individuals. But if we are to answer his question authentically, we must take time to think about who we say he is—because we can never tell others unless we ourselves really know.

The late Rev. Rachel Hosmer was an Episcopal nun who founded the Order of St. Helena and later became one of the first women ordained to priesthood in the Episcopal Church. Knowing who she was adds weight to the story of her dream about ordering from the Sears catalogue. This was no ordinary catalogue! It included various models of Jesus and gave her the ability to order the Jesus of her choice. "There was Jesus as a seminary professor, with a pipe and tweed jacket. There was Jesus the farmer, with calluses on his hands and dirt under his fingernails. There was a suburban, churchgoing Jesus in a suit and tie. There was a Latino Jesus, and an African-American Jesus, and even a feminist Jesus, who enabled the bent-over woman to stand up."

In her dream, Hosmer chose and ordered one of the Jesus models shown in the catalog. She received a Jesus, but it was different from the one she had ordered, so she requested another Jesus. Again, she got an alternate Jesus, not the one she had chosen. Again and again she ordered one Jesus and received another. Yet "every time, it really was Jesus whom she was given." Finally, the message of her dream became clear to her. Yes, "Jesus would come into her life; but he was always different from her expectations, always wonderfully surprising."ⁱ

Who do you say Jesus is? I pray today that you will consider that question, and that you will share with him not only your public side, but also your private side. And that he may be different from what you expect, and always wonderfully surprising. *Amen.*

ⁱ Synthesis. Proper 16—Postscript. August 27, 2017.