

Who Do You Say Jesus Is?©

Matthew 16:13-20

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We've seen a lot of disturbing things in the news lately, haven't we? I've been thinking a great deal about what happened at Charlottesville, Virginia. Considering what our president said about there being very good people on both sides – including white supremacists and the KKK, as well as those who were protesting against racism – some of them who became violent.

I've been thinking about mobs of people tearing down confederate statues, one of which was this week in Durham, North Carolina. I keep wondering what my response to the riots and protest, to tearing down statues should be, as a Christian.

Let's look a minute at this clip:

<https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000005364404/protesters-tear-down-confederate-statue-in-durham.html>

You heard the Scripture in Matthew where Jesus was with his disciples. He had been with them for a while now and had been teaching and healing. He asked them “Who are people saying I am?”

They told him that they heard some people say they think he is John the Baptist, come back alive. Or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets of old.

Jesus looked at them and after a minute he asked, “And who do YOU say I am?”

Peter immediately burst out with, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus called Peter the “Rock” and told him he would be the one who would build his Church.

Peter may have confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, but he still did not fully understand what that implied. Not long after that he rebuked Jesus for saying he was going to be killed and Jesus actually said to Peter, “Get behind me Satan!”

Yet, Peter still was the one who started Jesus' Church after Jesus died.

It is a struggle to fully understand who Jesus is. It was hard for the early, original disciples too. They kept getting it wrong. Jesus kept having to explain and teach them that his ways were different than the ways of the world.

So, my question to you, my congregation – my little motley crew of baptized believers who claim to be Christian (a Christ follower; A present day disciple) is this:

Who do YOU say Jesus is? Honestly think about it. We say together what we believe in different affirmations of faith – like the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, or others, but when you take time to ponder on what you know about Jesus and his teachings, his life, his commandments, his death and resurrection – who do you really believe Jesus is?

And the next question, which is just as important, is this: Based on who you believe Jesus is; on your understanding of how he taught his followers to live – what difference does it make in your life today; in your response to what goes on in the world? How do you, as a disciple of Jesus, respond to racism, to bigotry, to violence, to mob mentality?

Remember back in the 1970's, people were wearing leather bracelets with **WWJD** inscribed on them? Have you asked yourself that question – *What would Jesus do?*

This is not meant to be a debate or to send anyone on a guilt trip. It is a serious question I am asking myself. If I am angry about what I see and hear – whether from a political party, or our president, or a hate group, or whatever, is my anger justified? Is it anger that Jesus would have, and show?

We know Jesus did get angry when he saw injustice. But we also know he taught to turn the other cheek. To make sacrifices. To love our neighbor as we love ourselves, and he demonstrated that love and compassion with the hated people in Samaria; with the Samaritan woman.

Others, who considered themselves to be righteous, were very prejudiced against the Samaritans because of their beliefs and their mixed race. Yet, Jesus spent time with them, talked to them, cared for them and for others like them in society.

What would Jesus say about mobs tearing down statues? Would Jesus advocate for that? Would he say to leave it alone and focus on other things?

I think of Paul when he went to Athens where there were many statues and idols. People were critical and confused about what Paul was teaching.

Did he demand they tear down those idols? No. Paul walked through the streets looking at all the statues – all the gods they had erected. Statues like these – these are the Greek gods: Poseidon, Zeus, Hercules.

<https://pixabay.com/en/poseidon-ocean-sea-mythology-1190564/>

<https://pixabay.com/en/hercules-statue-greek-ancient-god-588138/>

I don't know that those are the idols Paul saw back then, but they were similar.

Then Paul very carefully commended the people of Athens for being so religious, thus they listened to him as he told them about Jesus.

One of the idols was inscribed as being an “Unknown God,” so Paul told them he knew who that God is – it is the “God who made the world and everything in it.” And he told them all about the one true God, and some people mocked him, but some became believers. (Acts 17)

How do Christians – people who do their best to know and follow Jesus, the Son of the Living God, live in response to the culture and actions in society? We know in the Old Testament believers used violence and war to fight for God. But when Jesus came, is that what he taught – or was it something opposite?

Based on what you know about Jesus – when is it time to stand up and speak out? When do we march for justice? Do we ever use violence? Is it ever okay to hate a group of people – a race, or a different gender, or sexual orientation? Is it okay to “live and let live” as some people say?

Jesus tells us what is the greatest commandment of all (in Matthew 22:36-40) **“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.”**³⁸ **This is the first and great commandment.**³⁹ **And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’**⁴⁰ **On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”**

That sounds pretty serious. Those two commandments are what the entire Law (the Ten Commandments that God gave Moses) and all that the prophets taught in the Old Testament – Jesus said these two commandments he is giving is what they are all about.

When I think about those statues of hard, cold stone that Paul saw in Athens, that we see today in the news, being fought over whether they should stand or be torn down, thinking of what they stand for – is it history, or is it racism? Or something else?

And I have to examine myself, my own heart to see where I am in all this. To remember Jesus’ greatest commandment is to love. Is my heart cold as those stone statues? Do I need to first remove that stone before I can truly love every person who is loved in God’s eyes?

Isn’t it true that when we tear down the statues of stone in our hearts, then the erected statues of humans are null and void?

Peter did go on to build the Church and to teach the Church about the one who is the reason we exist – Jesus Christ. The Church exists so that we might know Jesus, know his teachings and ministry, and to be his disciples in the world – a world that is in chaos and confusion. It always has been and it always will be.

Peter said (in 1 Peter 2:5) ⁴ **“Coming to (Jesus) as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, ⁵ you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”**

Jesus is the cornerstone of the Church. Every church building has a cornerstone. But the Church universal is built with Jesus as it’s cornerstone.

We too will be rejected at times, as he was. But we are this living, spiritual house – we are living stones – all of us are little priests, baptized into his family and filled with the spirit of God to be empowered to make a difference in the world in the name of the one we follow – Jesus Christ our Lord.

So, think about it with me, please. Seriously consider in the coming weeks - **Who do you say Jesus is? And what difference does it make?**