

Who do you say I am  
St. Ben's 8.27

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you,  
Holy one.

When I was in my 20s I had a really hard time reconciling my faith in God, my interest in being a part of a church community, and Jesus. Christianity, in general at the time, seemed really toxic to me. Most of the mainline denominations were dominated by very restrictive views of who could be ordained and how people should live their lives. I did not share their values and had no intention of compromising or changing my expansive understanding of God's love.

I also struggled with their idea of Jesus and what seemed like a very punitive version of sin. So I started looking for alternatives to explore my faith but without this weird version of Jesus. How could I reconcile being Christian if I thought Christ hated me?

So, as I kept exploring and reading and journeying, I found out about biblical hermeneutics or interpretations of scripture. I found inclusive worship spaces and found my way to a Jesus who didn't hate me but would walk beside me. The Jesus that I can and do see in others who question and journey through their own faith process. The Jesus I came to believe in and still love today.

In our Gospel text for today, we come to a turning point in the flow of Matthew's Gospel. With the decisive revelation that Jesus is "The Messiah, the Son of the Living God," Simon Peter reveals that the Messiah of God has come and that there is no need to wait any longer. Jesus then responds to Peter with "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." With this recognition, Jesus also establishes Peter as the rock on which the church will be built. Then, he ends this encounter by ordering the disciples not to tell anyone Jesus was the Messiah. As we experience the Jesus of Matthew, we can see the somewhat reluctant messiah. A little unsure of the vast expanse of God's love and his role in that work. As we experienced with the Canaanite woman who showed Jesus that he was also called to share God's love outside the children of Israel. The ever-expanding understanding of who Jesus is and what it means for him to be the Messiah is where Matthew begins to turn. It is very important to note here that as Jesus begins to do a new thing in establishing a faith community, we do not read that Israel is to be displaced by the new thing Jesus is creating. God's promise is still with Israel, who never

abandoned them in favor of the church Jesus was creating. As we craft and create our Christian narratives, it is very important that we recognize that both the church and the House of Israel have prevailed against Hades and the forces of evil so that we aren't unintentionally creating antisemitic narratives of our texts and stories.

Now, I'm sure some of you were hoping for an in-depth recounting of church history, , and how apostolic succession relates to our Gospel text today. But instead, I would like to dig deeper into the idea of narratives. One question caught my attention and just hung on as I prepared for my sermon this week. "But who do you say that I am?" The question Jesus asks the disciples after they go through the list of who everyone else says he is. I couldn't think of a more relevant question or moment for our current context. How do we express our faith in a time of deep polarization? Episcopalians are notoriously bad at evangelism. If I'm being honest, I was a little scared about including that word in my sermon today. Yet, we love who we are and how we do church so deeply that it almost bursts forth from us anytime we have a chance to really talk about liturgy or the music or why our communities are meaningful to us.

I wonder how we would answer Jesus' question. Yes, we would answer similarly to Peter that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, but what does that really mean to you? What has that meant for you, not just now but throughout your life?

Maybe it's been a long winding road like the one I described at the beginning of my sermon or maybe you aren't sure who Jesus is to you now and you still have questions. All these places we are, journey through, and from are welcome here and loved. God knows us in our struggles and joys. So, when we answer the question Jesus asks and share our faith with others, we share the ever-expanding love of God with . Through those interactions, we also learn more about how God shows up in the world and how we can see Christ in others. Our faith is an active faith calling us to take the church beyond the walls, praying with people at our Discovery Team pop-ups, and connecting with people at our Laundry Love ministry or the community meal program. Our work as a community must leave the walls. While Jesus made sure his disciples didn't tell his messianic secret at this time, we have the benefit of time to know the importance of sharing the gift of God's love and the beauty of belonging to this wonderful community. It is up to us to find ways to share that love.

What is your story of the church, of community? I hope that you have an opportunity to share your story of Jesus and the church with someone this week.

It took me a long time to accept that Jesus and the church could be positive influences in society because the only messages I heard were the opposite of that and didn't expose me to a non-violent Jesus who loved those on the margins.

As we all go into our week,

My prayer is that we look for moments to smile at a stranger, spread love to those we don't know need it, do our best to be the hands and feet of Christ in the world, talk to those we can about what we did on Sunday and to reflect on who we say

Jesus is. **Amen**