

Sermon by **Ann Gillespie**

Proper 19

Psalm 116, Isaiah 50:4-9, James 2: 1-5, 8-10, 14-18, **Mark 8:27-38**

Theme: There are two ways to know Jesus – in our own personal glimpses and in his body, the body of Christ.

Who do people say that I am? And they answered him, “John the Baptist and others Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”

But who do you say that I am? Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”

This question of Jesus’ identity is a fascinating and troubling one.

Theologians have fought over Jesus’ identity for centuries. “The DaVinci Code” has broken publishing and box office records all chewing on this same question: who is Jesus, really?

Last fall in the very first class of Systematic Theology at VTS, our professor, Jeff Hensley, asked each of us to articulate in five words or less, Who is Jesus? I’m pretty sure I was not the only one who felt a bit of anxiety at revealing something so personal and exposing in five words in our first class. We went around the room, each of us sharing and I was intrigued by the responses. There were quite a few along the lines of: “My teacher and my friend.” And a few more like: “The incarnation of God’s love.” Fewer still along the line of: “My judge and my redeemer.” I don’t believe anyone said something like “The alpha and the omega” or “The head of the church.” Most of the answers implied some kind of personal experience, some kind of loving, healing, relationship. Most of the answers, of course, were simplistic and ultimately frustrating. How can you capture Jesus in five words?? That was the point of the exercise. But something else occurs to me about our collective responses. Each one of us seminarians had some deeply personal connection, some past experience with knowing Jesus. The sense of personal connection to Jesus is important, essential even and yet it is not the whole story. My concern is when our theology is based solely on a personal relationship with Jesus we lose the sense of being in community, of being the body of Christ. We need to remember that as a community of faith, we are responsible to and for each other.

In his new book on church vitality, called *What’s Theology Got to Do With It?*, Tony Robinson talks about the danger of “too personal a savior.” He says: “The code language of ‘Jesus as my personal Lord and savior’ seems to be an attempt to capture and control the living God, to reduce God to our limited understandings... There is too little sense of church as a people of

God... Individuals and souls are saved,” he says, “but what of the redemption of communities, cities, and the creation itself? ”¹ I like what he has to say. He puts his finger on that larger piece of Jesus’ identity that I felt was missing in our collective responses to the question, Who is Jesus?

In today’s Gospel, Peter gets it right, at least for the moment. Peter sees in Jesus, not only his friend and beloved teacher but the Messiah, the Christ - the one who just might fulfill the ancient hope for the restoration of the people of God. As readers of Mark, we are told, in the first verse of the first chapter that this is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. We’re in on it. But Peter is the first person *in the story* to correctly identify Jesus. He’s beaten to the punch by a few demons – you recall several healing stories where only the demons recognize Jesus -, but Peter offers our first human witness to Jesus as the Christ, the anointed one who will reconcile not just individual souls but the whole people of God as a people. Isn’t it ironic then that within 6 chapters, Peter will deny knowing Christ three times. In Mark 14: 71 Peter says: “I do not know this man you are talking about.” How is it that Peter can be the first human able to know Jesus as the Christ but then deny knowing him so emphatically? Perhaps because knowing Jesus is always an elusive endeavor.

I have often turned to Frederick Buechner to help me understand the mystery, the ambiguity of knowing Jesus. In great empathy with Peter, Buechner says none of us really know who Jesus is. “Beyond all we can find to say about him and believe about him, he remains always beyond our grasp, except maybe once in a while the hem of his garment.” He says, “We should never forget that. We can love him, we can learn from him, but we can only come to know him by following him.”² I carried this quote around with me for a year when I first read it because it helped me reconcile both the unique and special ways that I felt Jesus had touched my life and it also named the fact that I could never really get a handle on who he was. That image of only being able to catch the hem of his garment was so powerful. I think we seminarians in that Theology class, we were trying to describe the hem of his garment.

¹ Robinson, Anthony B. *What’s Theology Got to Do With It?: Convictions, Vitality and the Church*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2006. Pgs 73-5

² Connor, George, ed. *Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner*. HarperSan Francisco, 1992. Pg. 301

If following Jesus is a way to know him, there are places we can go to look for him. Buechner suggests– “in his church, in his gospels, in each other.” So right now, I invite you to turn and look at the person sitting next to you, or behind you. Find a face you can see and look for Jesus Christ in that face. What do you see?

I would add, for us Episcopalians another place to look for Jesus is at this table. Together at this Eucharistic feast, we are offered an intimate opportunity to know Jesus. We are invited to partake in his spiritual body and blood, to listen to his words, to experience his love and sacrifice and be nourished by him, transformed by him, as individuals and as a people. Whether we kneel or whether we stand, whether we come with guilt and sadness on our hearts or not, we leave His table in a different state than when we arrive. We may come as individuals but we leave as a people. We leave having been incorporated into the body of Christ. Know Jesus, come to the table and hold fast to those fleeting moments when you can feel the hem of his garment.