

We Are Who You Say We Are
Matthew 16:13-20
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When I was in college, I wrote an entire paper on the word “y’all.” I had some reservations about this topic because, even though I went to a school here in North Carolina, my professor wasn’t from the South. I had no idea if she—someone who seemed very ordered, principled, and by-the-book—would find this topic appropriate for a formal English paper. Still, I labored tirelessly over the paper, extolling the virtues of the word “y’all” by pointing out how convenient it was for addressing clearly a group of people instead of a solitary individual.

It turned out my professor loved the paper...because she thought it was hilarious. She told me it was an excellent example of satirical writing, and fortunately I was thinking quickly enough to agree with her on the spot. But the truth is, a lot of the “jokes” that she praised in the paper were earnest, sincere arguments.

The crux of my essay was this: “y’all” is a really useful word. There are second-person-plural words in most languages, but English has to resort to this southernism to communicate clearly. When we use “y’all,” we inevitably emphasize that we value *all* in the group, not just one. It is a word that accentuates the importance of community.

It is the word that Jesus uses when addressing the disciples in today’s scripture passage. Our translations read “who do you say that I am,” but the original Greek uses a second-person-plural word; Jesus is essentially asking “who do *y’all* say that I am?” It is a much more interesting question.

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I think that, if I had been a disciple, I would get mildly terrified every time Jesus asked the group a question. It would have felt like when a teacher throws a pop quiz at the class, except the teacher in this case would have been Jesus, so the stakes for getting it wrong seem significantly higher. In the scripture reading this morning, the pop quiz starts with an easier question, “Who do people say that I am?” You can almost hear the disciples jumping at the chance to answer that one—no matter how they respond, if things turn south, they can claim, “well, I heard someone else say that” and pass the buck. No wonder there’s a shotgun spray of answers, from John the Baptist to Elijah to Jeremiah to “one of the prophets,” the final answer so vague that it almost has to garner at least half credit when the test comes back graded.

Instead of pressing them on their answer, however, Jesus turns and asks the truly challenging question, “But who do y’all say that I am?” The scripture jumps straight to the answer, courtesy of Simon Peter, but in my head, the scene includes a long and awkward silence where the disciples glance nervously at each other wondering how they should reply. Maybe a few of them stare at their feet or mumble something incomprehensible. None of them makes eye contact with Jesus himself. It’s just that hard of a question.

In the end, it's Peter alone who is willing to venture an answer. Because it's Peter, he answers confidently, essentially repeating that he believes that Jesus is the Messiah to eliminate any doubt. Peter, at least outwardly, isn't willing to hedge his bets, unlike my image of the rest of the disciples.

It turns out Peter didn't need to hedge anything—his answer is spot on, and Jesus praises him for it. As Jesus tells Peter he will be the rock of the church, it feels like we are headed toward a message of outreach, of spreading the good news and building something impressive. Instead, we get an unexpected turn, in the final verse, where Jesus orders the disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah. What's the point of the quiz if they can't even share the right answer with other people? Why does Jesus demand that they remain silent?

There are a lot of possible answers to that question. One of the most common is that Jesus knows what will happen to him once enough people start calling him the Messiah, and he has a certain amount of work to do before he can face the cross. That makes a lot of sense, and it's definitely a viable reason why Jesus shushes his disciples.

Still, it's an odd situation, because Jesus initiates the line of questioning in the first place, and he doesn't have to do that. If he didn't want the disciples to tell others who he is, he doesn't have to bring the subject up. He must have a great reason for asking the disciples these questions at all, a great reason for raising the subject of who he is (or, more accurately, of who they think he is), a reason that has nothing to do with sharing the answer "you are the Messiah" with a wider circle.

The reason is: this isn't primarily a passage about outreach. It's a passage about identity.

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For most of my career, I've worked with teenagers. One of the things about working with adolescents that is equally fulfilling and frustrating is that their identities are explicitly unformed. I found a lot of my job centered on helping them discover and form who they are.

We had a tradition at my last setting where I would bequeath to graduating high school seniors a blessing in the form of a word. Each student who came through our church received a personalized descriptor, a single word that attempted to summarize and capitalize on their greatest qualities, their roles in our group, their essences.

Inevitably, as I gave these words out to the students, I would find myself saying something along the lines of "this is who I think you are, but it is also what I think you will become." The words were meant to be both characterization and challenge.

If someone you respect tells you that you are smart, or hard-working, or committed, or of high character, then ideally you end up embracing that quality even more fiercely in the future. You work to become even smarter, or more diligent, or to protect your character. I don't think this is limited to adolescents. I think that we are all wired this way.

Who others say you are is, to some extent, who you actually are. This is especially true when it comes to the people you love and the people who love you: who your family and friends say you are is, to some extent, who you actually are. Jesus knows this, and there seems some part of him that yearns to have his identity confirmed by those who love him. He asks "who do y'all say that I am" because their answer will, even just a little, shape who he is.

I'm not saying that Jesus needed the disciples in order to be God...but I am saying that there is a relationship, a community, that existed among Jesus and the disciples that was critical for the mission of all involved. The disciples needed Jesus...and Jesus, remarkably, needed the disciples. And that relationship affected his essence, his purpose, his identity

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Like most passages, this scripture isn't just about one thing; in this case, it's not solely about the identity of Jesus. It's also about the identity of the disciples. Their answer will say a lot about how much they've been paying attention, about how courageous they feel even in an intimate setting, and about how well they can express themselves. Their perception of the man they have chosen to follow will determine a great deal about how they see themselves. Are they followers of a prophet—even a transcendent prophet like Elijah or John the Baptist—or are they followers of the Messiah himself? When Jesus asks “who do you say that I am,” he is really asking “who are you?”

It is fascinating that they do not all answer. When Jesus asks the first question—the warm-up question, “Who do others say that I am?”—Matthew writes that *they* respond with myriad answers. But when Jesus asks the toughie, only Peter responds. Some scholars claim that Peter is answering “on behalf of the group,” but Matthew is clearly emphasizing the group initially and then turning the attention solely to Peter.¹ Jesus does the same, asking the “y'all” question but then emphatically switching to the singular when praising Peter as the foundation of the church. So perhaps instead of asking “who are you,” Jesus is asking “who are y'all?” Who is this group, collectively?

Even if each disciple would have answered the exact same way that Peter answers, their communal identity seems murky here. We may know, from reading these verses, that Jesus is the Messiah...but we are likely to wish for a clearer sense of who, exactly, the disciples are as a group.

This is particularly critical given the emphasis on communal identity throughout the Bible. That emphasis starts with the introduction of the family unit as deeply intertwined in the first chapters of Genesis and continues throughout the Old Testament.² In fact, if one were hard-pressed to name a central character in the Old Testament, it would likely not be Abraham or Moses but rather the nation of Israel, the corpus of God's people. The Hebrew Scriptures are focused not on individuals entering into a relationship with God but instead on a whole nation embracing and respecting that relationship. It is concerned far less with the identity and character of David, of God's chosen person, and far more with the identity and character of Israel, of God's chosen people. Jesus similarly highlights community here by asking for the disciples' collective opinion, and yet only Peter answers verbally.

We have, as Baptist and Americans, understandably accentuated the role of the individual, but our holy text seems more concerned with the role of the community. The focus is not on me but on we. It is not on “you” but rather on “y'all.”

¹ Boring, *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 8, 344.

² Mbuvi, “Belonging in Genesis,”

https://dukespace.lib.duke.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/10161/833/D_Mbuvi_Amanda%20_a_200808.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y.

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At this point in their lives, the disciples are young men...but they are men. Many of them have had careers—fishermen, tax collectors—before choosing to devote their lives to following Jesus. My guess is that they have some sense of who they are individually, some traits they cling to and take pride in, even as they are changing and growing in their relatively new roles as disciples.

It seems to me they don't have a clear communal identity. They are "disciples," but what does that mean to them? Who do they think they're following, exactly? Are they willing to articulate their sense of that man—to say out loud what they believe? Should they even speak those words in the first place? They do not seem to have definite answers to any of these questions, not as a group.

But when Jesus asks, and Peter answers, they are getting closer to understanding who they are. They may not yet be ready to build on the cornerstone that Christ recognizes because they do not yet seem confident in their communal identity, but they seem to be moving in the right direction, and Jesus seems pleased with that movement. Their communal identity is that they are still figuring things out.

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At least one other significant part of the disciples' community comes through in this passage: they are not all in the same place. When it comes to the first question—the "who do others say that I am?" question—Matthews writes "they answered," suggesting a unified voice. When it comes to the second question, they do not display this unity. There's no way to know exactly why they do not—maybe some are unsure about who Jesus is, or unsure about how to phrase it, or simply shy—but Peter is none of these things, and others are.

Despite the fact that they are not in the same place, Jesus is affirming of Peter without disparaging the rest. This is really important, because it suggests Jesus recognizes they are moving in the right direction even if they are not all in the same place yet. He is, therefore, affirming of the growth this group is making toward establishing a communal identity. He even opens the possibility that they are forming communal identity without all being in the same place.

At the beginning of the coronavirus ordeal, it was popular to offer encouragement in the form of the phrase "we're all in this together."³ I never felt comfortable with that phrase. I loved the idea of projecting encouragement, loved the idea of feeling united in the face of impending catastrophe, but I felt isolated and separated by masks, by distance, and by ideology. I did not feel like I was in anything "together."

Part of the problem with the phrase was that it connoted that we were all in the same place or on the same page about the virus...and, clearly, we were not. We still aren't. We never will be.

We would be better served to seek a collective identity that doesn't require a homogeneous viewpoint, to seek unity without requiring uniformity. It is the image of the church our scripture offers through the metaphor of "many parts, one body." It is the image of community that the disciples embody in this passage...one cornerstone, many other roles.

³ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/were-all-in-this-together-is-the-dumbest-lie-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic>

It is extraordinarily challenging to determine and agree upon the identity of a community without uniformity...but that is what our scriptures exhort us to pursue. And, based on how the rest of their story plays out, I like to think it is what the disciples eventually achieved, after starting with these questions that Jesus asks, after starting with “who do y’all say that I am?”

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The themes in this passage are among the most ancient truths in our world. “Know thyself” is one of the Delphic maxims attributed to the Seven Sages of Greece in the 6th Century BCE. That’s over half a millennium before Christ was even born. But in the Christian context, the emphasis is not on the individual but rather on the community. It’s more “know y’all’s selves” than “know thyself.” That self-knowledge is significant for individuals but biblically it is even more critical for communities. Without it, there is little chance of moving forward or upward.

It is not too surprising, honestly, that the English language values the singular “you” so much that my spellcheck underlines “y’all” with red squiggly lines. It is not too surprising that we would proclaim “we’re all in this together” while separated by six feet of air and diametrically opposed philosophies. We live in an era where we are struggling mightily to find any sense of who we are collectively, a problem that extends to all areas and subgroups of our world. Within each of these groups, we must know our communal identity before we can tell others about who we are, before we can expect others to align themselves with our sense of purpose or with our way of thinking.

Like the disciples, we are a group of people in different places, sometimes capable of speaking and other times struck mute. We are sometimes confident—in our faith, in our leaders, in our progress—and other times unsure. We are complex, multifaceted, even self-contradictory. We are learning, maturing, generally moving in the right direction, we think. We hope.

When Jesus asks, “who am I” and “who are y’all” at the same time, we are a group that can answer assuredly, “We Are Who You Say We Are.” That, in the end, must be our identity.