

Who Are You?
Matthew 26:57-75

Who are you? That's the question that faced both Jesus and Peter on the night when Jesus was betrayed. It's the same question, but they gave very different answers.

And the ones asking the questions were very different as well, weren't they? Peter, at least at first, was accused of being a follower of Christ by a slave girl. In that day and in that society, she would have been considered to be the lowest of the low. If it came down to a question of her word against Peter's, we couldn't expect anyone to believe her. And let's face it – she certainly wasn't a physical threat to a full-grown man.

Yet here we see Peter – whose powerful shoulders and arms could easily pull in a net full of fish, and whose tireless legs had followed Jesus all over Galilee and Judea for three years – here is burly, bronzed Peter stammering and cowering before a slave girl. What gives?

And it's not as though Peter was asked to make any sort of theological statement about Jesus. He was not asked to affirm any of Jesus' teachings, or repeat any of Jesus' miracles, although he had done both of those things before on mission trips. He was not even asked to confirm his belief that Jesus was the Messiah, or if Peter was planning to participate in some sort of revolution. No, all Peter was asked was whether he knew Jesus, whether he had been with Jesus. Yet it is this simple question that shattered Peter's confidence.

But why? After all, in last week's passage, Peter and the rest of the disciples abandoned Jesus. They ran off and left Jesus when He was arrested in the garden. So, why didn't Peter just admit this? Why didn't Peter say, "Yeah, I'm from Galilee, and I used to follow Jesus. I was hoping that He'd stick it to those nasty Romans." That line would undoubtedly have earned Peter some applause from his Jewish audience, for it's very unlikely that there would have been any Roman Gentiles in the high priest's courtyard.

Peter could thus have continued. "Yeah, I used to follow Jesus until I realized that He wasn't going to lead the revolt. That's when I knew He wasn't the Messiah, so I left Him. What a phony."

But why didn't Peter say such things? He had already abandoned Jesus in the garden, so why didn't he just admit it? Why didn't he complete the betrayal he had already begun?

Well, maybe it wasn't so simple for Peter. Yes, he and the rest of the disciples had in fact run off and left Jesus, but Peter still seemed to care about his Rabbi, his friend. After all, Peter did follow Jesus to the high priest's house. Yes, he followed at a distance. No, he didn't want anyone else to know about his friendship with Jesus, but he did follow. It seems that Peter still had too much of a connection with Jesus to allow him either to leave Jesus or to denounce Him publicly.

Okay, so if all that's true, then why didn't Peter come out and admit his abiding loyalty? Why didn't he proclaim, "Yes, I was a follower of Jesus, and I still am. I said a long time ago that He was the Messiah that the Lord promised us, and I still believe that. I have taught others the things that He teaches, and I have done miracles of healing in His name. And just this very night, I told Him that I would go with Him to prison and to death. So, if you all are going to kill Him, you're going to have to kill me, too."

But if Peter didn't publicly denounce Jesus, neither did he publicly identify himself with Jesus. Even after the rooster crowed, and Peter had thus fulfilled Jesus words, the prophecy that Peter would deny Jesus three times that very night, Peter didn't come clean. His fear of sharing Jesus' fate, the fear of being arrested and beaten and being cast out of society just wouldn't permit him to admit even to a slave girl that he even knew Who Jesus was.

Yes, Peter was sorry that he had denied Jesus. Yes, he wept bitterly. But he didn't admit any of those feelings to anyone else. His fear of being identified as a follower of an arrested criminal simply overrode his love and loyalty for his teacher and friend.

Who are you? Peter refused to answer that question, at least with respect to his relationship with Jesus. But how many of us would give a clearer answer?

Now, whenever we recite the Apostles' Creed we all profess that Jesus is in fact Who He claims to be. Like Peter, we believe that Jesus, the miracle-working rabbi from Nazareth, is God's Messiah, the one who died on the cross and rose from the dead. And here in the buckle of the Bible Belt we don't mind having people know that these are facts we consider to be true.

No, the question for us most of the time is much more subtle: are we willing in our everyday lives to be publicly associated with Jesus? Are we willing not just to follow Jesus at a distance, but to stand with Him, to be identified with Him, day in and day out?

Let's put it another way. Those folks in the high priest's courtyard suspected that Peter was a follower of Jesus because of his Galilean accent. Could the way we live give anyone reason to suspect that we are Christians? Could what we say or the way that we say things lead people to believe that we are followers of Christ? And what would that mean for us, here and now?

Now I know – in Southwest Mississippi it is still socially acceptable to be a member of a church – at least among people our age. But as more and more Americans increasingly denounce what Christians believe, and as the opponents of the gospel make greater and greater efforts to “cancel” anyone who disagrees with them, will we continue to be willing to be publicly identified as Christians?

Now, we could talk about a whole host of issues on which the Christian perspective is increasingly unpopular: the definition of marriage and the nature of human sexuality are just a few that come to mind. But there's one conflict that really underlies all of them. There's one modern-day assault on Christ and His Church that all of us are called to stand against, and that is called “pluralism.”

So, what do pluralists believe? Some say that all religions are really the same, and that everyone is really worshipping the same god. Others go so far as to say that religion is merely a matter of opinion or personal taste, so it doesn't really matter what you believe as long as you are sincere. Pluralists therefore insist that since there are so many different religions and so many different interpretations of Scripture that no one can be really certain of what's right and what's wrong.

In fact, the only thing of which all pluralists are certain is that there can be no absolute truth about anything. That's why they all see the exclusive claims of Christ as nothing more than narrow-minded, intolerant bigotry. For Jesus didn't claim to be “a” way. No, He claimed to be “the way” – the only way to the Father. Jesus didn't claim to be “a truth” – only one among many. No, He claimed to be “the truth,” the only touchstone of reality. And if Jesus is the only way and the only truth, that necessarily means that all contradictory ways and all contradictory truths must be wrong.

And the exclusive claims of Christ have always been controversial – in fact, that's why the apostles and their followers were persecuted by the Roman government. Now, make no mistake – the Romans were polytheists: they believed in lots of gods, so they didn't care if Christians wanted to worship a god called “Jesus.” No, the Romans hated the Christians so much because the Christians publicly proclaimed that all the other gods besides Jesus, all the other gods that the Romans worshipped were fakes.

And the fact is that modern-day pluralism is just old-fashioned polytheism in a new wrapper. For both belief systems maintain that there is more than one truth, more than one way. And so as long as we don't play along, as long as we insist that Jesus is the only way, we should expect to be called narrow-minded, intolerant bigots. But that will only happen if we are faithful to Christ.

For, after all, we can choose to do as Peter did. We can try to keep our personal beliefs about Jesus secret and private. We can refuse to be publicly identified with the scandalous, exclusive teaching of the gospel. But if we do so, our silence denies Jesus just as surely as Peter's lies did when he was asked, “Who are you?”

Well, how did Jesus answer that question on that same night? What did Jesus say when He was urged to confess His identity? And remember, those who asked Him that question were deadly dangerous. We may shy away from people who say mean things to us, or who threaten to suspend our Facebook accounts. Peter quailed when standing before an inquisitive slave girl. But Jesus was manhandled by a gang of thugs who not only mocked

him but also beat Him in the face. And yet, in spite of all their accusations and threats and abuse, Jesus would not deny Himself.

But was all that pain and suffering really necessary? After all, we know that Jesus was a true prophet – his accurate prediction of Peter’s three-fold denial proves that yet again. So, why didn’t the blindfolded Jesus wow his abusers by telling them which one of them was beating Him? And why didn’t He do some miracle before the religious leaders, to convince them of Who He was? Why did He allow all of them to go on believing that He was nothing more than a fake and a phony rather than proving that He is the only way and the only truth?

Well, think about it. They had all heard His teaching, which had time and time again silenced all His critics. And what great wonder could He possibly do for them that He hadn’t already done? After all, Luke tells us that He had miraculously healed the high priest’s slave whose ear Peter had cut off just minutes before in the Garden of Gethsemane. And John tells us that Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead just a few weeks before His triumphal entry into Jerusalem – the whole town was still buzzing about that miracle. So if such undeniable displays of God’s truth and power wouldn’t persuade the chief priests and the elders and the scribes, what would?

No, the bottom line is that, no matter what Jesus said or did, these religious leaders wouldn’t have believed Him, and they wouldn’t have let Him go. And they hated Jesus for the same reason that pluralists hate modern-day Christians: Jesus had dared to say, not that He was right, but that they were wrong, that their interpretations of the law were flawed and that their teachings were thus misleading the people of God.

And so it didn’t matter to those religious leaders that none of Jesus’ accusers could get their stories straight about what He had said or done – nothing would convince them that He was the Messiah. He could have flown to the moon and they still would have howled for His blood.

But that raises the most puzzling question of all: why didn’t Jesus just fly to the moon? After all, as verse 53 makes clear, at any point He could have put an end to all the abuse and opposition, summoning legions of angels to protect Him and to give Him the glory and honor that He deserved, the glory and honor that the leaders of His own people refused to give Him. The Son of Man could have come in power and glory right then, bringing judgment to the whole world, and bringing an end to Satan’s rebellion without Jesus having to suffer any more persecution and pain. If we could command that kind of power, surely that’s what we would have done.

But the good news is that Jesus is not like us. The good news is that while we are faithless and fearful, seeking to avoid pain and discomfort by ingratiating ourselves with others, while we all too often deny Jesus with our words or with our works, Jesus will never deny us. The good news is that when the elders and the chief priests and the scribes asked Him, “Who are you? Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?” Jesus answered without hesitating, “You said it.”

And Jesus knew that as He said this, He was allowing Himself to be beaten and humiliated, mocked and scorned, publicly disgraced not because He told a lie, but precisely because He told the truth. And Jesus chose to go through all of this, for faithless, fearful sinners like Peter, for faithless, fearful sinners like us, not because we are faithful to Him, but because He is faithful to us. Jesus allowed His enemies to crucify Him, Jesus suffered all the pains of death and Hell, not because we loved Him but because He loved us.

Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. That’s what Jesus did for us. So, how can we go on living as undercover Christians? How can we possibly value the world’s approval more than Christ’s love? And since Jesus laid down His life for us, surely we should go farther than just admitting that we know Him – surely we should love Him and live for Him with all our heart.