

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 arms could easily cast and then 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 was this simple question that shattered Peter's confidence.

But why? After all, just a few verses earlier in this chapter, we learn that Peter and the rest of the disciples had already abandoned Jesus. They had already run off and left Jesus at the time He was arrested in the garden. So, why didn't Peter just admit what he had already done? 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 He let Himself be arrested. That's when I realized that He wasn't going to lead the revolt. That's when I knew He couldn't be the Messiah, so I left Him. What a phony."

But why didn't Peter say such things? Why didn't he complete the betrayal he had already begun?

Well, maybe it wasn't so simple for Peter, and maybe you know what that's like. Maybe you have someone who has been a real friend for a long time. And maybe they hurt you badly, but there's still something between you. It's hard just to cut someone like that off.

Yes, Peter and the rest of the disciples had in fact abandoned Jesus, but Peter still seemed to care about his Rabbi, his friend. For even though all the disciples had scattered from the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter did muster up the courage to 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, in spite of his fears, 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, if Peter still had a connection with Jesus, 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 my friend, you're going to have to kill me, too."

But Peter didn't say that either. If he didn't publicly denounce Jesus, neither did he publicly identify himself with Jesus. No, even after the rooster crowed, even after Peter fulfilled Jesus' prophecy that Peter would deny Jesus three times that very night, Peter didn't come clean. His fear of sharing Jesus' fate, his fear of being arrested and being beaten and being cast out of society just wouldn't permit him to admit that he even knew Who Jesus was – even to a slave girl.

Yes, Peter was sorry that he had denied Jesus. Yes, he wept bitterly. But he wasn't willing to 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. We celebrate the fact that He calls us His friends. And here in the buckle of the Bible Belt we don't mind anyone knowing that we consider these facts to be true.

No, the question for us most of the time is much more subtle: are we willing in our everyday lives, by what we say and what we do, 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 as His friend, day in and day out? And what would that mean for us, here and now?

For the fact is that fewer and fewer Americans are willing to stand with Jesus, to accept His claims on their lives. In fact, according to George Barna's research, a third of Americans say they don't believe there is a god and don't even care. And as more and more Americans 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?

Sure, 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 maintain that all religions are really the same, and that everyone is really worshipping the same god – you may have heard people say, "There are many paths, but only one end." 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. In one way or another, pluralists 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 make no mistake: Jesus didn't claim to be "a" way. No, He claimed to be "the way" – the only way to the Father: He said, "No one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). Jesus didn't claim to be "a truth" – only one among many. No, He claimed to be "the truth," the only touchstone of reality. In fact, He went so far as to say, "He who hates Me hates My Father also" (John 15:23). 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 modern-day pluralists just can't stand such an exclusive notion.

But when you come right down to it, 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 technically 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 so we can see 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 what Peter did. We can try to keep our personal beliefs about Jesus secret and private. We can refuse to be publicly identified with the increasingly 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 same question on that same night? What did Jesus say when He was commanded to confess His identity? And remember, those who asked Him that question were deadly dangerous. Yes, we might shy away from people who say mean things to us, or who threaten to suspend our Facebook accounts because we speak out for Jesus. In a similar way, Peter quailed when standing before an inquisitive slave girl. But in contrast, 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?

And we might think that's the answer to dealing with the pluralism of our day: fight fire with fire and aggression with aggression. We might think we should strive to prove our points with meticulous logic and to embarrass those who disagree with us. But think about it. Jesus' opponents had already heard His teaching, which had time and time again silenced all His critics. And what about the great wonders that He had 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 hadn't persuaded the chief priests and the elders and the scribes of Jesus' true identity, what would?

No, for some people, it doesn't matter the proofs that you provide or how clearly you explain Jesus' claims to them. For the bottom line is that, no matter what Jesus might have said or done, the 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.

Remember, it isn't what we believe that is so scandalous to the pluralists today. It's the fact that we say what they are teaching is wrong, and they don't want to change what they believe or how they live. Just 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 have convinced 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 hatred and abuse. He could have summoned 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, while we all too often seek to avoid pain and discomfort either by hiding our true identity from or by lashing out at those who disagree with us, 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 offering further proof but also without hesitation: "You said it."

And Jesus knew that by saying those words, He was allowing Himself to be beaten and humiliated, mocked and scorned and publicly disgraced – not because He told a lie, but precisely because He told the truth. And Jesus chose to go through all of that scorn and abuse, all of that pain and shame – everything Peter feared so much – 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. Yes, Jesus allowed His enemies to crucify Him, Jesus suffered all the pains of death and Hell, not because we loved Him but because He loves 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 His friends, surely we should go farther than just admitting that we know Him. Surely we should be faithful to Him. Surely we should love Him with all our heart, no matter what it costs. Surely we should live only for His glory. For does our friend deserve anything less?