

**+ Luke 9:18-24 + Jesus' Question, My Answer: Who Do You Say I Am? +
+ 6th Sunday after Pentecost: Confirmation of Steven Walter Cooley + 30 June 2013 +**

It was around the year 155, and the life of an elderly Christian bishop named Polycarp was hanging in the balance. Polycarp had once sat at the feet of the Apostle John who taught him about Christ. Later the Lord used him to faithfully serve God's people for many years in the region of Smyrna in present-day Turkey, but the heat of persecution was turning up on Christians across the Roman Empire. Confessing Christians were condemned as "atheists" who rejected the Roman gods. They were "unpatriotic enemies of the state" because they refused to burn a little incense in worship of Lord Caesar—the ruler of the Empire.

The Romans, who considered themselves religiously tolerant, were quickly filled with bloodlust intent on torturing and killing Christians who refused to reject their faith. Christianity was spreading rapidly and the pagans saw it as a threat to national unity and security. Regional persecutions blindly attacked Christians young and old alike, and so elderly Polycarp found himself in the midst of an arena, where the throngs screamed for his death.

On the arena floor, the governor of the region demanded that he reject the Christian faith. "Swear by the fortune of Caesar; repent, and say, 'Away with the Atheists.'" Polycarp turned towards the raging crowd and waved his hands in the air, "Away with the Atheists!" Once more the governor demanded, "Swear, and I will set you free—reject Christ." What would he say? Would he cave in? Would he sacrifice his Christian faith to save his skin? You could almost hear Jesus asking, "**Who do you say I am?**"

Polycarp answered well. "Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and he never did me any injury—how can I blaspheme my King and my Savior? ...Hear me declare with boldness, I am a Christian. And if you wish to learn what the doctrines of Christianity are, choose a day and you will hear them." The Roman soldiers started building a pile of wood and prepared a fire for the elderly Christian pastor.

"**Who do you say I am?**" Jesus' question to his disciples echoes down through the ages to you and me. We're especially aware of it today on this Confirmation Sunday as another young man publicly confesses his Christian faith in Jesus, but to be honest, this question needs to be personally answered by every one of us here today.

If you've paid attention at all in the last week or the last couple months or the last few years, you've noticed that it's gradually getting harder to be a confessing Christian publicly living out your faith and good confession. When those attempting to protect the life of the unborn are shouted down by those who hold no value for any life but their own, when courts make it more difficult to defend marriage as God intended it to be in his Word, when common ground and reasonable discussion dissolve into polar opposites and angry rhetoric, when peer pressure on our children and teens and adults ratchet up to compromise with what the world says is right and to ignore what Christ says, when more and more Christians and Christian congregations cave in to the increasingly anti-Christian world around them, we need to consider Christ's question to his disciples and what our answer to that question means for our daily lives—**WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?**

Jesus had not yet turned his face towards Jerusalem, but he would soon. Although he was still very popular among the crowds, opposition against Jesus was starting to increase. One day he took some time to spend a quiet moment in prayer with his disciples. After their prayer, Jesus asked them, "**Who do the crowds say I am?**" It's not like Jesus didn't know the answer, but he wanted to give his disciples the opportunity to confess where they stood with him, to confess their faith in him.

The crowds, of course, had all kinds of answers to that question. "He's a great teacher." "He's a righteous man." "He's an example for our kids." Some even ventured so far as to say, "He's a prophet." In fact, the disciples got pretty specific about that last answer. "**Some say John the Baptizer; others say Elijah, and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.**" Those answers were nice. Many of them came from very pious, respectful people, but there was something missing. Not a single answer from the crowds identified Jesus for who he really was. Instead they made Jesus out to be what he was not. For all the miracles he performed, he wasn't quite glorious enough to be the Messiah for them. For all of his authoritative preaching, he wasn't really more than a great prophet.

Had this awfully short-sighted thinking infected his disciples too? Were they no different than the crowds? Jesus asked, "**But what about you? ...Who do you say I am?**" Peter, who was something of a spokesman for the disciples, immediately spoke up on their behalf, "**The Christ of God.**" Matthew gives us Peter's complete answer, "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.**" (Matthew 16:16) There was no doubt in their minds what the answer to Jesus' question was. He was God's Anointed. He was the Messiah, the One whom God had promised their forefathers back to Adam and Eve, the Fulfillment of all the prophecies, the Christ who came to save. To the disciples, Jesus was no mere prophet or rabbi or even a moral example. He was "**the Christ of God**", "**the Son of the living God**".

What the disciples didn't realize at that time was what their good confession would mean for their lives. Being "**the Christ of God**" meant that Jesus had a special mission to carry out. He told them, "**The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.**" Great suffering and rejection and death were coming to Jesus, and he wanted to prepare his disciples for it. Yet there was a purpose in Jesus enduring all that—the holy God demanded that if sinners would be saved, Jesus had to suffer and die and rise again. Jesus would have to make his way to the cross to pay the full price for the sins of all people, but his journey would not end with a bloody cross bearing a dead Jesus. "**On the third day [he will] be raised to life.**" Resurrection and glory and victory were coming too, but first suffering and rejection and the cross.

If that was what was going to happen to Jesus, surely suffering and rejection and the cross should have been no surprise for Jesus' disciples. "**If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.**" Weeks after this account, Jesus' disciples would forget these words and try to save their own skins, while abandoning Jesus. After Jesus' resurrection, they would finally understand what he meant. Confessing Jesus to be "**the Christ of God**" means denying the desires of the sinful flesh and bearing that as a cross, even as the sinful nature constantly attacks from within while Satan and the sinful world attack from without. A day would come when they would give up everything, even their lives, for Jesus no matter what torture or persecution or death they had to endure. In so doing, the Lord of grace had a crown of life and eternal rest waiting for them.

When Jesus asks you, "**Who do you say I am?**", how will you respond? In the comfort of our congregation, it's easy to answer with Peter, "**The Christ of God**", but what about when you go home? When you go to work? When you go to school? When you spend time with your friends? When you go online? How will you respond to Jesus' question?

Think about it this way. In a few minutes, Stevie will be asked, "**Do you intend to continue steadfast in this Christian teaching and to endure all things, even death, rather than fall away from it?**" Ask yourself that question. Will you remain faithful to Christ and his Word and be more willing to give up your life than reject your Savior? Have you? When you're left with your sinful nature or when the sinful world turns the heat and pressure up on you, will you confess Christ or cave in? What about when you're at work or school and the conversation turns into ridicule of Christianity? Will you confess Christ or cave in? What about when you're among friends and you have a choice of either going along with them to do what is not God-pleasing or being rejected for saying no? Will you confess Christ or cave in? What about when anti-Christian rhetoric increases not only in volume, but in violence? What if the so-called "tolerant" majority become intolerant when it comes to Christians like you? Will you confess Christ or cave in?

The truth is, we all have caved in at some point, haven't we? It's so tempting to answer Jesus' question in a safe way, conforming him to the world, minimizing who he is and what he said and why he came. It's so much easier to keep your mouth shut and your head down when making a good confession is more God-pleasing. It's so much easier to compromise, but that only means abandoning Jesus.

Jesus knows that. He saw it firsthand with his very own disciples whom he would send out to boldly confess his Name, and for that reason, Jesus shows you why he endured rejection and suffering and the cross and death. He endured all that for you—to forgive you even for those times when you caved in and poorly answered his question, to cleanse you with his holy and innocent blood for all your sins, and to bury your sinful nature with him in death so he can raise you to new life through his resurrection.

Through his Word, Christ has revealed himself and all that he has done for you and all that he still does and will do for you. Through the water and Word of Holy Baptism, he sent his Holy Spirit to create faith in your heart. After instruction in the Word, he now feeds you his own body and blood with bread and wine to strengthen that faith and forgive your sins—all of them completely. He continues to strengthen your faith and deepen your roots in him through the study and hearing of his Word, so that when the time comes for you to answer his question—"**Who do you say I am?**", you can confidently answer, "You are **the Christ of God.**"

Knowing what Christ has done for you, you can gladly deny yourself and take up your cross to follow him. Making that good confession means you will take God's Word seriously, that the Bible is the Word of God and has his power and authority no matter what, even in the face of anti-Christian opposition. With Christ's help, you will boldly confess Christ and follow him no matter what, and in the end, a crown of life and eternal rest await you in heaven.

In the end, that's what awaited faithful Polycarp. He lost his earthly life for the sake of Christ, but received eternal life from Jesus. That's what awaited the apostles. That's what awaits you someday. Christ lived for you. Christ died for you. Christ rose again for you. When he asks, you know how to respond—"You are **the Christ of God.**" Boldly confess that. Boldly live that. Boldly follow him. Amen.