

"Decide For Yourself: The Progressive, Positive, & Practical Message of Jesus"
by Rev. Dr. Durrell Watkins
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²⁷...Jesus asked the disciples this question, *"Who do people say that I am?"*²⁸They replied, *"Some say John the baptizer; others, Elijah; still others, one of the prophets."*²⁹*"And you,"* he went on to ask, *"who do you say that I am?"* Peter answered, *"You are the messiah!"* (Mark 7)

Before we talk about Mark, I want to remind you of another story.

In the 32nd chapter of the book of Genesis, Jacob wrestles with a stranger, do you remember? They wrestle all night. And Jacob refuses to let the stranger go until he gives Jacob a blessing. The blessing Jacob finally gets is to learn who he really is. The stranger says, "You are no longer Jacob. Your name is now Israel, for you have struggled with God." And then Jacob, or now we should say Israel, asks the stranger, "And what is your name?" And the stranger simply says, "Why do you ask MY name?"

You see, Jacob had deceived his brother Esau, deceived his father, had been deceived by his father-in-law, had been on the run from his brother whom he feared had a vendetta against him, and after all this dishonesty and running and struggling to find his way, Jacob's struggles are symbolized by an encounter with a stranger. Maybe it was a dream he had where the subconscious mind was dramatically helping him work out his issues, who knows? But after struggling for so long to know who he was and where he fit in, he learns who he really is. The struggle to know himself was a divine struggle, and so he is Israel...the one who engages in a divine struggle. And the blessing that results from that struggle is to know who he is. When he asks the stranger, "What's your name?" The stranger basically says, "That's not even the right question...what you needed to know is who you are...and now you do."

I love that story. And I see it being repeated in a way in today's Gospel reading. Mark seems to have a similar message, but comes at it a bit more directly. Instead of having a stranger tell us who we are, Mark has us affirm our Truth for ourselves. We simply get to decide!

Mark's Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am?" And there's a list of opinions that others have been all too glad to offer. There is always a politician, a religious institution, a family of origin, a lover, an ex-lover, a friend, a salesperson, a teacher, a stranger, an ad agency...there is always someone telling who we are. Who do people say that I am? Some say this, some say that. But who do you say that I am?

And Peter answers for himself, he decides what the answer is for him. Peter says, "you are anointed." There's no complicated Trinitarian formula, no long creed to be recited, no loyalty to a hierarchy, no literalist view of an ancient text...just the simple affirmation...you are messiah...that is, you are anointed. I see something divine in you, on your life. Something holy in me recognizes something holy in you. You are anointed.

But the question is do you say that I Am? If we can see the divine spark in Jesus...if we can the Logos, the divine Idea being expressed in, through, and as Jesus...then that must be our I-Am-ness recognizing his I-Am-ness. The I Am Consciousness, the understanding that I Am a child of God, that I Am one with all that is, is what is being reflected back to us from Jesus.

You know, our mothers used to tell us that when we point a finger at someone we have three more pointing at us! We tend to project onto others what we believe about ourselves. If we feel inferior, we look for the inferiority of others to help us feel better. If we feel incomplete or not good enough, we see the flaws and failures in others and lift those up to keep from acknowledging our fears of inadequacy.

But when we see our goodness, our potential, our light, our nobility, the Universal Wisdom expressing through us, divine Love manifesting as us...then we see those same wonderful gifts in others. To say to Jesus, "you are anointed" is to say that deep down, I recognize that I am anointed. Who do I say that I AM. That's the point of today's exchange. Just as with Jacob, the divine encounter is meant to leave us knowing our true nature. The blessing is to finally know who we are.

Modern day mystic and Dominican priest turned Anglican minister Matthew Fox reminds us that the very early church leaders and the medieval mystics a millennium later all understood and celebrated the omnipresence that God is. Divinity is found everywhere, in everyone, in everything. Fox quotes medieval thinker Meister Eckhart saying, "in this breakthrough I discover that God and I are one..." To know that God and I are one is the I Am that we see in Jesus, and that we see in Life, and that we see in the mirror when we look through the lens of enlightenment.

The 4th gospel has Jesus saying I Am living bread, I am the light of the world, I am the gate, I am the shepherd, I am truth and life, I am the vine. Matthew Fox tells us that when we read those statements they are meant to lead us to ask, "how am I also living bread to the people around me? How am I light to those who are looking for illumination? Jesus' positive and affirming I Am statements are meant to inspire our own. What are we pulling into our I-am-ness? How are we using that divine name, I Am that I am, to express hope and healing and life and love and courage and compassion in our world?

Matthew's gospel puts it this way, "When you did something for the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it for me." I AM one with all life. I AM one with the lonely, the hurting, the confused, those who haven't yet learned to love themselves. When you help that human, you've helped humankind...you've injected something wonderful into the stream of life and you have acknowledged the source of life equally present in and to all creatures. God is omnipresent...when you find something of God, you have found all of God because God must be totally and equally present at all times and all places and in all people...that's what Omnipresence is! You are anointed by God...hey, wait...that means that I am anointed by God. The anointing in non-local...it's omnipresent. To affirm you is to affirm me.

Even at the Communion Table, we hear Jesus say, "I am bread, I am wine." I am one with food and drink, wheat and wine, soil and sunlight, rain and reaping, work and play. I am one with all life. To celebrate the divinity we discover in bread and wine is to celebrate the divinity that dwells within us, and within our neighbor. Our communion is just that...comm-union...a symbolic representation our unity with all that is, and with the divine Presence that gives birth to all that is.

Jesus doesn't ask Peter today, "What do I do?" He doesn't ask Peter, "What can I prove?" He doesn't ask Peter, "What is my job?" He doesn't ask Peter, "What are my accomplishments?" He asks, "Who do you say that I am?" You are anointed. I must be seeing through the lens of anointing to realize that you are anointed. I Am anointed with the love and grace of universal life. The divine in me acknowledges the divine in you...isn't that what Emmanuel – God with us – is?

Jacob struggled to know his true dignity, worthiness, and sacred value. Because we have been taught that we were no good, we must struggle too. The image of struggle in Mark's gospel today is to take up a heavy cross bar and follow in Jesus' footsteps. But those steps lead us to know who I AM. I am a child of God. I am light and truth and living bread. I am one with the magnificent heavens, and with the least of these my sisters and brothers. I am one with the work of producing bread and wine, and I am one with the delight of eating and sharing bread and eating and sharing wine. It's worth the work to learn who we are.

Who do others say that I am? Fine. That's just information. But who do I say that I am? Well, that's the affirmation that makes a difference. I get to decide to embrace the divine truth of who and what I am. And learning the truth of who I AM is the good news. Amen.

**I am one with all life!
I am one with divine love!
I am one with infinite goodness.
I am light and life, peace and power.
I am a child of God.
And so it is!**

“People ought to think less about what they should do and more about what they are.” Meister Eckhart