



September 16, 2018 - "But you...?"
Given by Rev. Mattei

Martin Luther recommends in his Small Catechism to mark ourselves with the sign of the cross at the beginning and at the end of day. (See our ELW, p. 1160 and especially 1166-67). We want to remind ourselves whose we are and by what act of love we have been freed.

Today's [Gospel](#) gives the disciples some bitter pills to swallow. Jesus told them he was going to suffer and die in humiliating fashion. Then he said that those who want to follow him should expect the same treatment. Many Christians were martyred through the centuries for their refusal to give up their faith. In our American society, where any restriction of religious freedom is likely to come from peer pressure rather than from laws or governmental actions, it's easy to forget that other countries don't have nearly the same freedom to follow their Savior that we do.

The Chinese government under President Xi Jinping has intensified pressure on Christians this year, demolishing hundreds of large and small Christian church buildings without notice to church caretakers, seizing Bibles, and removing crosses from buildings. In Beijing, 47 places of worship released a joint statement that they had faced "unprecedented" harassment since February, and some Christians have begun to hold their services in secret rather than in church buildings or house

churches, many of which have been shut down across China. Some areas have banned Communist Party members and children from attending services. Posters of Jesus have been replaced with portraits of Xi. Christians are being questioned about their faith. Some churches have been raided or are watched by surveillance.

Muslim places of worship have also had their crescents removed, and the Chinese government declared that Buddhist monks in Tibet could not reincarnate unless they had permission from the government before they died.

China is estimated to have 67 million Christians, and that number is expected to become the largest Christian population of any nation in the next few years. Religious freedom was written into the Chinese constitution in 1982, but various government administrations have used rules about development rights and patriotism to restrict those freedoms since then. Xi's current campaign seeks to merge Christianity and other religions with "Chinese characteristics" like loyalty to the Communist Party and to weaken suspected ties with the West. International Christian Concern, a watchdog group, has criticized China for cracking down on churches. Yet, hunger for a genuine spiritual life is growing in China.¹

Jesus' gruesome talk about the necessity for everyone to pick up and carry one's cross followed his question about people's opinion about his identity. When Jesus asked his own disciples about their opinion of him, Peter replied on behalf of his companions with a spiritual insight that Jesus appreciated. Peter's reply originated not from logical reasoning but from a spiritual understanding that justified Jesus' "*But who do you say that I am?*" Peter's was not a prefabricated and historical

¹ <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/we-must-pay-so-dearly-chinas-churches-raided-silenced/>

expectation. In fact, the title “Messiah” (in Hebrew) or “Christ” (in Greek) was reserved for the future liberator, a royal figure from the line of David expected to come and free Israel from their Gentile oppressors, purify the people, and restore Israel’s independence and glory. Peter’s was not a logical reply. Jesus had made no claim to be the Messiah, he had no political ambitions and he certainly had shown no sign of taking on the Romans. It must have been an intuition of faith to which Peter arrived through personally knowing Jesus. Jesus was not a royal Messiah but he looked and sounded more than just another prophet, which was already remarkable considering that Israel had experienced a five centuries long prophetic dry spell.²

Peter did not want to hear Jesus’ interpretation of being Messiah: not a power motivated leader but a suffering servant of all. And the disciples were ordered to be silent about this: they hadn’t gotten Jesus yet. They couldn’t properly be talking about him to others in their evangelical efforts: it would be a gross miscommunication of Jesus’ message and life purpose. The disciples needed to wait until after the death and resurrection experience to have a more complete picture of who Jesus was. The fact that he didn’t get it was evident in his reaction to Jesus’ announcement of his (and theirs) suffering by the hands of the powerful. Embracing Jesus’ life style of truthfulness, non-violence and simplicity on behalf of the kingdom takes one straight to the cross, the glorious outcome of faithfulness to God’s love and justice.

We who also follow Jesus, whether closely or by far, are asked the same question: “Who do you say that I am?” Our answer may vary according to the different

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intertestamental_period

seasons of life and at different spiritual stages. Our relationship with him, if consistently intimate, is bound to reveal to us who he is and, conversely, who we are. As we grow spiritually, we move from indifference to empathy. Other people's pain becomes our pain; their joy becomes our joy ([Rom 12:15](#)).

As we are challenged to search deeper into our soul for an honest response to Jesus' question we uncover the meaning of Jesus for us. When I think of Jesus as the hungry, the naked, the prisoner, the stranger as described in the gospel of Matthew ([Mt 25:31-46](#)) I can't but make the same associations and answer in the same fashion: you are the people suffering from weather related catastrophes and human neglect; the refugee children still separated from their parents; the displaced by war; the persecuted by religious intolerance; the victim of hate crime.

And so I offer a prayer for you and me: I pray that we may always see you, Jesus, in those who suffer and open our heart to them. I pray that somehow we find ways to embrace you in them and follow your lead in serving them. For only when our heart is open to the suffering ones we may honestly say: "You are the Messiah."