August 23, 2026
First Congregational UCC
Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey
“Hope of the World”; Matthew 16:13-20

Jesus asked a lot of questions – more than 300, according to the gospels. *Do you want to get well? Do you love me? Why are you so afraid?* The questions Jesus asked were rarely as simple as they seemed. Jesus challenged people, taught people, and revealed white lies and half-truths with his queries.

At the beginning of today’s reading, Jesus asks, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” The disciples have a lot of answers. Clearly, people are talking, drawing squiggly lines between Jesus and John the Baptist, Jesus and Elijah, Jesus and Jeremiah. The murmuring crowd is convinced that the Son of Man must be a manifestation of one of the prophets. But Jesus is not satisfied to know what other people are saying about him. His follow-up is more piercing and personal. *But who do you say that I am?*

Before we ponder Peter’s confession of faith that “Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God,” it’s worth acknowledging that there are still a lot of voices saying a lot of things about Jesus. You’ve got preachers in pulpits, Sunday school teachers in classrooms, grandmothers at kitchen tables. All with something to say about who Jesus is.

Some of these confessions of faith are collective. Many churches recite creeds together in unison, rehearsing their beliefs about Jesus week after week. We sing a lot of theology, with hymns that proclaim who Jesus is in song. Anyone who has visited me in my pastor’s study knows that I have a wall of bookshelves. The books that aren’t *about* Jesus are about how to follow Jesus.

It can be a lot to sort through, all these voices about Jesus. I generally believe in practicing humility when it comes to interpreting scripture. There is much we do not know. We rely on the help of the Holy Spirit and trustworthy teachers to understand what we read, and recognizing we could be wrong is a healthy posture. But there are things people say about Jesus that make me wonder if we're even reading the same book. The Jesus I encounter in Holy Scripture is compassionate, wise, merciful, loving, just, demanding, surprising, and holy.

He acts in ways that defy logic. He is so unlike any other human being that something in my soul somersaults with conviction that he truly is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. But we are well aware that not everyone comes to the same conclusions about Jesus. Some people reject him outright. And some people who agree that he is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, describe him in ways I barely recognize, and follow him places I don't want to go. I tend to think it's best to focus our energy on who we think Jesus is rather than who we think Jesus is not.

But sometimes it's helpful to consider voices that are – how can I put this delicately? Wrong.

Around the turn of the century, Mars Hill Church in Seattle started growing. And growing. And growing. The pastor of the church was famous for being cool and macho. The pastor was cool and macho and so was the Jesus he encountered in Holy Scripture. He said, and this is a direct quote, "In Revelation, Jesus is a pride-fighter with a tattoo down His leg, a sword in His hand and the commitment to make someone bleed. That is the guy I can worship. I cannot worship the hippie, diaper, halo Christ because I cannot worship a guy I can beat up." [1]

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1 https://reknew.org/2010/09/revelation-and-the-violent-prize-fighting-jesus/

It is hard for me to read those words. Harder still for me to say them out loud. I believe they are lies about our Lord – lies that celebrate bloodthirsty violence when we know a Jesus of sacrificial love. A Jesus who preached about forgiving enemies and wept when his beloved friend Lazarus died. I believe that pastor engaged in theological malpractice and biblical misinterpretation for this to become his portrait of Jesus. You probably won't be surprised to hear that the church eventually closed on account of allegations of bullying and abusive leadership.

What we believe about Jesus matters. Who we say *Jesus* is, shapes who *we* are. If we believe that the Son of the Living God is compassionate, just, and forgiving, and we are committed to being his disciples, we know that we are called to be compassionate and loving and just and forgiving. If we believe the Son of the Living God is merciless and violent, and quick to rain down fire upon anyone who doesn't fall into line – we are quick to justify hostility, judgment, and domination. In the wise words of Anne Lamott, "You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."

What we believe about Jesus also matters because, presumably, some things are actually true, and some things are false. According to the gospel of Matthew, people were saying that Jesus was John the Baptist, risen from the dead. And this was wrong. So were the rumors that he was a resurrected prophet. He was none of these things. He was the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

Unlike the words that hurt to say, this feels sweet on my tongue. There goes my soul somersaulting again. Maybe even throwing in a cartwheel for good measure. The Bible gives us many more true and holy ways to speak about Jesus.

Who do you say that I am? Jesus is the Good Shepherd, the Way, the truth, and the Life, the Bread of Life, the Light of the World, the True Vine, the Word Made Flesh, the Prince of Peace, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And the stories we find in the gospels paint a kaleidoscopic portrait of what this all means through the life, death, and resurrection of our Savior and Friend.

The more time we spend getting to know Jesus, the more likely we are to love him. And the more we love him, the more likely we are to follow him. This is what it means to be the church that is built upon the rock of Peter. Though, I think it's only fair to point out that mere moments after this exchange, Peter messes up. Peter shows that he doesn't fully understand who Jesus is. But this, too, is what the church is about: following Jesus imperfectly, together.

With humility and grace and truth-telling and forgiveness-seeking. Following Jesus, imperfectly, together. Breaking bread, wrestling with doubts, railing against wrongs. Doing justice, practicing forgiveness, serving neighbors. And worshipping the God who Jesus revealed. It's a good life in Christ, lived together.

This is how we find the hope of the world. This is how we become hope for the world. We will get it wrong sometimes. We will get him wrong sometimes. But we are here, together, and we get to keep living the questions, together.
Thanks be to God.