

If you were to unroll the ancient manuscripts of the gospel of Matthew, Mark, or Luke to their center you would find today's gospel lesson very near or at that midpoint. It seems that what we just heard Sue read is of central importance. Scholars have a fancy word for this placement of the main theme in the middle of a narrative writing: they call it a chiasm. Chiasm gets its name from the Greek letter "chi", which is really just a big "X." We find a variation of this word "chiasm" when scientists describe the center of a chromosome. Again, normal chromosomes are shaped like a big "X," and chiasmatic writing follows the shape of a normal chromosome on its side. The story points towards a central event or revelation, and then everything that follows expands on that new understanding.

What intersect at this chiasm in the gospels are two questions. Jesus and his followers are traveling through Caesarea Philippi, a region known for its multicultural variety and influences. This is a good setting for Jesus to ask the first question: "Who do the people say that I am?" Because of the diversity of this setting Jesus is likely to get more than one or two stock answers. The answers come popping up like spring daisies: "John the Baptizer!" "Elijah!" "Jeremiah!" "One of the prophets!" "Michael Phelps!" (you'll have to forgive Thaddaeus – the Olympic coverage has been keeping him up late).

Here is the first question, the question about Jesus' identity from without. What is the world saying about him? What clothes are they dressing him up in? It's a great question, for like it or not the world's perception of Jesus becomes a part of his reality. It is the world's perception of him that gets Jesus crucified. "Who do the people say I am?"

Then there is the next question, THE question, the chiasm, the big "X" marking the spot. "OK," Jesus says, "But who do YOU say that I am?" Now we move to the question about Jesus' identity from within. Simon supplies the answer of all answers to the question of all questions about the identity of God incarnate standing before him. "You are the anointed one, the Son of the living God," Simon says.

Identity. This chiasm, this pivot, this question to which the gospel points, this answer from which the gospel grows, is all about identity. Like that chromosome on its side, we could say Jesus' identity is made up of a DNA, of sorts: God's DNA. We are all familiar with what DNA looks like: a double helix, two parallel strands linked together like the rungs of a ladder. And these two strands that are bound together turn upon themselves, like a spiral staircase. Jesus' identity as DNA: the Father and the Son bound together in loving reciprocal relationship. And this DNA is the stuff of everlasting life. Jesus the Christ beyond superficial speculation, beyond the assumptions built upon witnessed miracles and profound teachings, the living Son of the Father. Yet envisioning Christ as God's DNA – Father and Son bound together as the basic building block of life – is to answer a different question, as if Jesus asked, "Who am I?" But Jesus actually asks, "Who do you say I am?" a question that forces the respondent to examine two separate issues: Who is Jesus, and who am I? This is an altogether different kind of DNA. And it is a vital piece of DNA for the life of our faith.

The DNA of our identity – who am I? – consists of two strands: the indwelling Christ within, and our true selves. The one strand of our DNA that is Christ is a given. We do not change this. It changes us. This first strand of our DNA is God's unconditional love for us. This strand is the image of God within us. This strand is the set of gifts and abilities that make each of us co-creators in God's kingdom. This first strand of our identity that is unconditional love and capacity to share that love is frequently the strand we ignore.

The other strand of our DNA is that of our true, unique selves. This is who we just are: our height, our weight, our passions, our loves, our dislikes, our humor (dry or exuberant), our

desire for company or solitude, our way of reaching out, our way of learning, our limitations, our joy. We also tend to ignore or even be unaware of this other strand, our true self.

By far we humans tend to attend to a shadow strand of our identity that is entirely false, a third bogus thread that we might call mutation. This is the aspect of our identity that seeks to conform to some outside norm. Invariably this is the voice that calls our true selves into question: you are not tall enough, or thin enough, or successful enough, or loved enough, or smart enough, or popular enough, or enough enough. When this voice calls long and stridently enough we tend to conform. We warp ourselves. We mutate the DNA of our true selves. We seek to be other.

Our identity is perhaps the great challenge of our lives. “Who am I?” is the echoing call from our first breath to our last. Our world around us changes, and in response we modify. At each change the answer to “Who am I?” seems to alter. When a child first walks alone, “Who am I” changes from “One-with-mother” to “One-in-the-World.” When we first move out of our parents home, when we marry, when we have dependents to care for, when we start a career, when we succeed, when we retire, all of these involve shifts and changes to our identity. This is primarily because we tend to put all our stock in the first question, “Who do others say I am.” I become my address. I become my alma mater. I become my occupation. I become what I do. It is kind of like a sinus infection. As a sinusitis worsens – and one’s face throbs and aches, and his/her teeth hurt so bad she/he cannot eat – the individual becomes the malady. And so when you see that individual with the sinus infection they are for all intents and purposes a walking and talking sinus infection. All of their being is directed to their illness. The same is true for much of our identity. It comes from without, who others say I am, and I buy into it hook-line-and-sinker. I cannot seem to know myself otherwise.

The basic task of the Christian life is to integrate the DNA of who we are, so that the one strand of “who I am in a given context” is bound to the strand of “who I am in God’s eyes.” Here we have the central importance and beauty of Christ’s dual questions, “Who do they say I am?” and “Who do YOU say I am?” What becomes revealed is not only who Jesus is, but who I am in my definition. In asking both questions Jesus separates the mutating influence of “the Them/The Authorities/The Ones Who Know” from the source of truth and reality, the love of God that flows so purely in Simon for one moment that his true Rocky self comes shining through in his confession that Jesus is the living Son of the living God.

What flows from this chiasm is the Christian journey, discovering and integrating our true selves with the love of God that is ever-present within us. In so doing we make of ourselves a beautiful double helix, where our true and beautiful selves become bound to the love that created us, like two shimmering strands of DNA. As each part of our being becomes bound to the love of God we create a rung, a handhold or foothold for angels to ascend or descend by. We become vehicles of God’s grace and love in this world.

And so as you go forth into the Caesarea Philippi of your lives, encountering the many voices that seek to make you other, carry with you this central question of Jesus, “Who do you say I am?” Find the love of God deep within you – it is there – and bind that love to your true self. Let this then be for you the basic building block of your being, the chiasm, the central point from which your life and your love flow. And to God be the glory.