

“You Make Me Want To Be A Better Person”

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Matthew 16:13-20 = “Who Do You Say That I Am?”

How many have seen the movie *As Good As It Gets* ~ a truly great but quirky romantic comedy set in New York City. The character Jack



Nicholson plays is Melvin Udall, a reclusive and self-absorbed writer. The movie follows Melvin's halting transformation from insulting and offensive to something on the road to becoming a *mensch*. The love interest in the film, Carol, is played to equal perfection by Helen Hunt. Both won Oscars for their performances.

Carol quite reluctantly allows Melvin to ask her out for dinner. In a pivotal scene Carol has just about had enough of his obnoxious personality when we see this scene: [film clip played]



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A75AgrH5eoc>

“You make me want to be a better person.”

What person would you just love to have say those words to you? Who would you like to say those to?

Peter could have said that, that day near Caesarea Philippi, but unfortunately, that is not what Peter meant when he said “You are the Messiah.”



As this very familiar text recounts, Jesus asks his disciples a question: **“Who do you say that I am?”** After other disciples hem and haw, Peter jumps up and says, **“You are the Messiah.”**

Peter comes off like that character on *“Welcome Back Kotter”* ~ the one who always jumps up and says “I know! I know!” even when he doesn’t have any idea. Peter does say it first, and that’s a good thing. And it’s true: Jesus is the Messiah.

Yet in saying “You are the Messiah” Peter actually has little idea what he is saying. This becomes clear a few verses later, when Jesus has to explain to Peter what being the Messiah means and Peter rejects it. Jesus must rebuke Peter with **“Get behind me, Satan!”**

Even more notable is Jesus’ response to Peter’s confession wasn’t like Carol’s. Jesus didn’t say **“That’s maybe the best complement of my life.”** What Jesus did say was to **“sternly order them not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.”** Probably because, as the subsequent conversations make clear, Peter and the other disciples had no understanding what being the ‘Messiah’ actually meant.



We may not comprehend its meaning either, especially those parts about the necessity of the Messiah to suffer, and even more those troubling parts about taking up our own crosses to suffer crucifixion ourselves. What Peter should have meant by ‘Messiah,’ what he might have said but didn’t is: “You make me want to be a better person.” That’s what following Jesus means.

That is what it should mean for us.

It is readily apparent that the disciples are not yet following Jesus to be made better persons, but at this point they expect the messiah to make things better for them. Like many of us they do not yet comprehend the difference.



It is so easy to fall into that trap of thinking that everyone else needs to grow and everything else needs to change, but “I am just fine, thank you very much.”



Few of us really want Jesus to help us become a better person, we think we do but that's not how we act. Our prayers are filled with desires to change our world. There's nothing wrong with that: we pray for a better world, for peace, for health for ourselves and others, for good things to happen; for rain to fall on the just and maybe even the unjust. God invites us to pray for all these things.

Yet just once in a while ought we not to pray also to be made better? For God to put us where God wants us to be? For us to be doing what God wants us to do?

I saw an example of this in a Pentecostal worship service in Indonesia. A couple comes forward for prayer and hands the pastor the title to their motorcycle. They ask for prayer to "change the motorcycle." An odd request, but the pastor assumes that their motorcycle needs repairs, so he prays for it to be fixed. When finished, the couple has a curious expression. "No, no," they say, "please pray that the motorcycle title be 'changed' into a title for a car!"

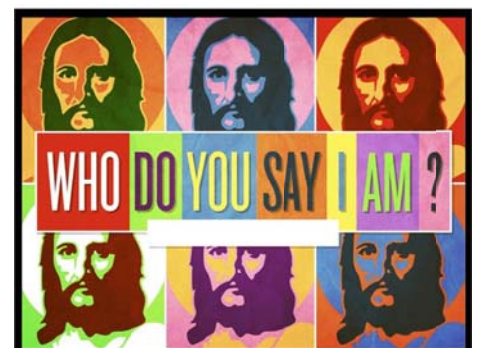


That's a clear example and easy to dismiss, yet don't we do the same ourselves in not-so-blatant ways ~ pray for conditions to be transformed but rarely do we tap into God's power to transform ourselves. Again, should we not once in a while pray for ourselves to be made better rather than for things to be made better for us?

Jesus came so that we could all be transformed, not just the conditions of life and not just our stuff, but ourselves, our whole selves. That's what today's text is about. That's is what our journey is about ~ anticipating ways God can make us better and use us.

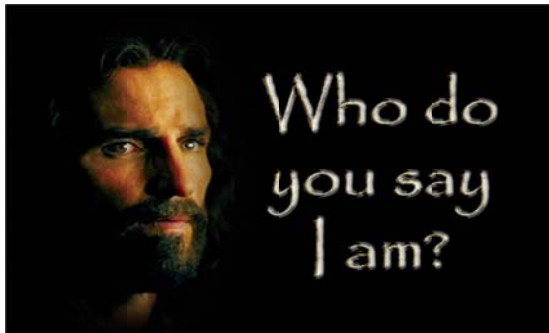
Jesus asks of each of us every day:
"Who do you say that I am?"

If we say "You are the Messiah," we better know what we're talking about. If Peter and the others who knew Jesus personally, who witnessed firsthand his miracles and heard firsthand his teaching, if they



couldn't comprehend the deep meaning of the messianic calling, then what chance do we have?

Yet there is hope. Remember *As Good As It Gets*. The movie depicts Melvin's halting transformation from insulting and offensive to something on the road to becoming a *mensch*. In time the disciples did get it and they were each transformed from reluctant disciples into courageous apostles. The same can happen, may happen, will happen for us ~ if we let God do it.



“Who do you say that I am?”

Answering “Jesus is the Messiah” is not enough. Answering with a convoluted doctrinal formula is not enough. But saying “You make me want to be a better person” is the best answer, the right answer.

Our answer to Jesus' question ~ the question he didn't just ask of Peter and Mary and John and Martha and Matthew and all the rest ~ the question he asks of us:

“Who do you say that I am?”

Our answer after we say: “I have decided to follow Jesus.”

After we say: “I am not sure what Messiah means, but I see in you Jesus a unique path to God.”

After all the other answers, our final answer, our ultimate answer should be, has to be, must be:

“Jesus, you make me want to be a better person.”