



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Who Do You Say That I Am?

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ JUNE 11, 2023

Jesus once asked His disciples, *“Who do you say that I am?”* (Matthew 15:16) This is the classic question: *“What say you of Christ?”* Who is He? Every one of us must answer that question for ourselves. We may want to regularly revisit that question as life goes on and as we experience different things, both joyous and otherwise. The disciples must have been wrestling with this question, too.

There is a story in the New Testament of a time when the disciples were on a boat on the Sea of Galilee and a storm came up. As waves and water threatened to capsize their boat, they cried out in fear. Jesus stood, raised His hands, and calmed the storm and the sea. They asked, *“What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?”* (Matthew 8:27). How would you answer this question? When I ask you this, I’m looking for what is in your own heart, in your own soul. Don’t answer in the way you *assume* is the correct answer, or with what you think I *want* you to answer; what is *your* answer? Who do *you* say that He is? Because whatever that answer is will determine what you believe about everything else. It will determine how you live, and it will determine your eternity. Plumb the depths of your soul for your honest answer, and resist a merely theological, scholarly definition (though it is important to know these things); identify who Jesus is to you. Who is He?

My favorite composer is Gustav Mahler. Perhaps some of you have heard of him. When I first discovered him, I couldn’t get enough!

I read everything I could get my hands on, including thick biographies. I purchased multiple recordings, oftentimes of the same piece, to hear how different conductors led the music. I acquired scores of all his symphonies and song cycles and did whatever I could to familiarize myself with them. Any time there was a live performance or a lecture, I was there. If another new study came out, I acquired it. His music inspires me, speaks to my soul, and lifts my spirits like no one else. There are times when his music can literally make me weep. As a result, I felt that I really knew Mahler.

Then I heard a brief interview with Mahler's daughter Anna. She started her remarks by saying, "My memories are not anecdotes. It is that I remember his hands; I remember his voice; I remember his walk. It was a famously unique walk and I remember it because I walked with him. I remember his eyes when suddenly he took notice of me." His smile told her that she delighted him and that despite his being wholly absorbed in his work, he loved her. It was then I realized that I didn't know Mahler *the man* at all. Not like she did. I knew much *about* him, I knew the facts about his career and was well familiar with his work and what it meant to me, and he certainly revealed something of himself in his work, but what of the man? Anna Mahler had the privilege of knowing him in ways I never could, an intimacy between a father and a daughter. I wish I could have known the man.

How much do we ever really know about another person, or even know ourselves? When a person really matters to us, we certainly go to great lengths to get to know them as best we can. I remember when I was courting Nanette and I couldn't wait for the next opportunity to spend time with her. I would make up excuses to spend time with her; and she wanted to get to know me, too. Even after she got to know me very well, she still married me! How about this! Here we are 35 years later and we're still doing that! We are still finding every opportunity to be together, do things together, talk to one another, and know each other well because every relationship takes effort and intentionality. It takes time and patience, sacrifice,

and a lot of love. And with a select few, like a spouse, we spend a whole lifetime discovering and rediscovering that person, changes and all, because as time goes on, we don't stay the same.

Jesus has revealed Himself. He has made Himself known to us, and He continues to do so. We have the opportunity to know Him, to draw close to Him, and to build a lasting, ever-growing relationship with Him. Fortunately, He has done most of the work because He knows us completely. Though Jesus knows everything about us and knows us better than we do ourselves, He loves us so much that He was willing to die for us. He wants us to **know** Him. Not just things about Him, not just His work, but to know **Him**.

For our Scripture reading this morning, we start with verse 18 in chapter 9 of the Book of Matthew.

¹⁸While he was saying these things to them, behold, a ruler came in and knelt before him, saying, "My daughter has just died, but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live."

¹⁹And Jesus rose and followed him, with his disciples... ²³And when Jesus came to the ruler's house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, ²⁴he said, "Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him.

²⁵But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl arose. ²⁶And the report of this went through all that district.

Matthew 9:18-19, 23-26

Why did they laugh? They laughed because they didn't yet know Him, and as a result, they did not know what was possible. Earlier in the chapter, Jesus had called the Apostle Matthew.

⁹As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, "Follow me." And he rose and followed him.

¹⁰And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and

his disciples. ¹¹And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹²But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.”

Matthew 9:9-13

Surely Matthew must have said something about Jesus to his colleagues. As we read in the Gospels of Mark and Luke, Matthew invited them to his house for a party so they could meet Jesus for themselves. There’s nothing better than a personal encounter. While they were there, they did not just hear about His miracles, they truly learned something about the character of Jesus’ heart—He came to save sinners. The Pharisees could not understand why He was spending time with “those people”! We must realize, sinners all, **we** are **those** people! Jesus did not come to save the righteous, whoever they might be, but to save sinners.

Salvation is more than just getting our ticket punched for heaven. He wants a **relationship** with us. It is not just getting a box checked off in our spiritual life. Jesus actually sat with sinners, ate with sinners, and spent time with sinners because He loved them. We go through a whole conversion experience and wonder, “Why, if Jesus has already saved us, must we go through the conversion experience?” But like a courtship, that is how a relationship begins, how we begin to get to know Him.

The relationship grows and grows until we get to the point where we each say, “I do.” We must grow to the point when we can finally say, “Yes. He is my Lord and Savior.” But it doesn’t stop there. That relationship continues to grow for the rest of our lives. It defines our Christian life. Our relationship with Jesus changes everything. It changes our worldview and our attitudes. It changes our hopes and dreams and the direction of our life. It changes and affects all other relationships. It affects our fears and our anxieties; everything is

affected by our relationship with Him. The deeper the relationship, the deeper the impact.

If we say that Jesus is the Lord of our life, but then we live our lives contrary to what He taught, **is** He the Lord of our life? Does He have authority, and does He shape and influence every part of our life? Everything we say, everything we think, everything we hope for, everything we do, our relationships, our plans, dealing with the past, dealing with the present and fears about the future, with Jesus shaping these things, **that** is what it means to be the Lord of all of life. That is why He wants a relationship with us.

Very early every morning, sometimes even before sunrise. I sit on my lanai, listen to the birds sing, and watch the sunrise. It is my time alone with Jesus. I pray and contemplate His Word, and I read wise words from other Christians I trust. I revel in the truth that He loves me more than any other person can. At times I weep in ways that even the effects of Mahler's music cannot equal.

We can see this in the scene that intrudes upon the miracle of the daughter of Jairus. Jesus has already agreed to go to Jairus' house and the text, beginning in verse 20, says,

²⁰And behold, a woman who had suffered from a discharge of blood for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his garment, ²¹for she said to herself, "If I only touch his garment, I will be made well." ²²Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well." And instantly the woman was made well.

Matthew 9:20-22

Consider the radical courage or desperation of this woman. She's had this flow of blood for 12 years, which means that she had to be isolated from the general population because she was considered unclean. She could not touch anyone or be around anyone, but because of her faith, she believed that she didn't even have to touch Him, just touching the fringe of His robe would make her well. What

faith! She risked going to Jesus when He was in a crowd. And Jesus stopped because this woman was no less important than the synagogue ruler's precious daughter. This woman was precious, too, and He called her "daughter." Her body was healed, and more importantly, so was her soul because He loved her.

Jesus said, *"This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent"* (John 17:3). It is a significant step in our spiritual life and continues as we learn more about Jesus and truly come to know Him. I have observed over the years that many people feel the need to mock or make jokes about Christ and Christianity. There are a few people who do so simply to be nasty, and malicious for the sake of being malicious, but most of the time people reject Jesus out of ignorance. They don't know Him, and as a result, they don't see the need for Him. They have no clue what having a relationship with Him is all about, and that it would change everything in their life. They ask, "What's the big deal about Jesus?" At times we look at the world and are very discouraged when fallen people are acting like fallen people, and sometimes even saved people are acting like fallen people. We pray for revival and fear that all is lost.

I am amused by how many people are self-proclaimed experts on the Bible yet have never read it. Or they claim to be experts on the church yet have never been part of a healthy congregation. They believe they are in a position to be critical. So in turn, they criticize Christianity with no idea what it is. They turn to other philosophies, worldviews, and seemingly wise and enlightened views of limited people for guidance and as role models. They may even drift through life following nothing except, perhaps without realizing it, the false promises of the world.

What we must understand about the Christian faith is that it is more than just agreeing with a set of propositions. It includes that; we **do** make statements of faith and what it is we believe, but at its core is a relationship with the Lord of life. How well do you know Him in a personal, experiential way? The Apostle Paul wrote, *"I count every-*

thing as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Philippians 3:8). All the other wonderful things in this life pale in comparison to knowing Him. If we really know Christ, we would not be able to stop talking about it. We display this attitude all the time. If we see a movie we love, we just can't wait to tell everyone about the wonderful movie we just saw. If we buy a new car or get a new job or are in a new relationship, we want to talk about it. If we go on trips with magnificent scenery and have unique experiences, we walk around showing pictures to everyone. Why? Because these things are important, they excite us, they have great meaning for us, and we naturally want to talk about them.

But somehow Jesus does not always inspire that much enthusiasm. We don't want to be a nuisance to people, we don't want to bombard them with this "stuff." And we certainly don't want to put on an act claiming to represent someone who doesn't really have our heart. It must be an authentic result of a relationship that has totally changed our life and our eternity. A genuine testimony of a total embrace of Jesus requires that our heart and soul are truly committed to Him. Why would we want to get that excited about Him? Listen,

⁸Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." ⁹Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

John 14:8-9

That means that people who saw Jesus saw God. In the Old Testament, the great heroes were not allowed to see God. They could not look at His face, but as He passed by, they could see Him from behind or they could hear a voice or see a cloud. But Jesus said that to see Him was to see God. What in human life could equal that experience? There have been people who, because they saw Jesus, could say that they had seen God in the flesh! Jesus also said in response to the Pharisees "...before Abraham was, I am" (John 5:58). You'll notice that the tense is wrong, and to be grammatically correct He should

have said, “before Abraham was, I was.” But He meant “I was, I am, and I always will be” —He was identifying Himself with the voice that came out of the burning bush to Moses in Exodus 3:14, “*I AM WHO I AM.*” This is why the Pharisees were so upset with Jesus; they thought He was blaspheming. “How can you say that you’re God?” That is why they were so angry. The Pharisees wanted to know why He was eating with sinners, and Jesus was quoting the Prophet Hosea when He said, “*I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice...*” But in the rest of the verse, “*the **knowledge** of God rather than burnt offerings*” (Hosea 6:6) stressed the importance of **knowing** Him! Also, Jeremiah said,

²³Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches,
²⁴but let him who boasts boast in this, that he **understands** and **knows** me; that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.

Jeremiah 9:23-24

If all of this weren’t enough, we are “those people.” And the Scripture says, “...*while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8). Do you realize what this means? This means we didn’t deserve it, we didn’t earn it, and we didn’t initiate anything or do anything, but Christ was willing to suffer that unspeakable pain and humiliation so that He could spend eternity with you and me. He loves us that much! This is when it becomes extraordinarily personal, and this is the Jesus who loves us so much that He wants us to know Him.

When you look in the mirror and the image looking back at you is someone in whom you’re disappointed, maybe because of some sin you regret, or a bad opinion you have of yourself; you don’t think you have any gifts or think you are at a season in life where you don’t have much to offer anymore and your life is not worth much — STOP! You are precious to Jesus! Your life has meaning! Your life has value! Everything you have done, everything you are He has been

involved in. He loves you **that** much, but you don't know that for certain until you know Him.

We might ask ourselves, "What are some of the ways that I can build my relationship with Jesus?" I'll briefly mention five, though there are many more. The first, of course, is studying God's Word, because that is a record of how God chose to reveal Himself. What is amazing about a biblical witness is that it becomes profoundly personal. For instance, we read the beginning of the 23rd Psalm, one of our favorite passages. Sometimes we read it so fast and indifferently it is like ordering a sandwich. "*The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want...*" Do you realize the revolutionary nature of that? The Lord, the Almighty Creator of the universe, the awesome majestic God, the One who judges and sustains everything... that God is **my** shepherd! What do shepherds do? They guide, they feed, they protect [your name here]. Most Scriptures are like that; they are profoundly personal and have implications for every aspect of our life.

The second way to build our relationship with Jesus is exactly what we are doing right now: We gather together for worship. We have the experience of bringing something of ourselves to Him. A relationship is a two-way experience. We submit ourselves to the preaching of the Word, we are blessed by the music and other aspects of worship that give us a glimpse of His glory, and we are ministered to by love. Being together reminds us that we are part of something greater than ourselves and each one of us is an integral part of it.

The third way to build our relationship with Jesus is celebration of the sacraments. These are not just churchy little things we do; they have profound meaning to us. They are visual symbols of an inner reality. Last week, Pastor Brad did a wonderful job describing to us the nature of communion. Jesus gave something of His own, a gift to remind us: remember Me, remember what I did, take hold of it, touch it, look at it, taste it, internalize it. It is not just a simple ritual; it is like a Jesus "I love you" card.

The fourth way to build our relationship with Jesus is prayer. Do you have an active prayer life? You ought to. You really need to. If you don't know how to pray, ask one of the pastors, and we will help you. Prayer is the opportunity to talk with God. Do you realize that you have access to the Almighty God who created the universe? It is crazy how some people think about this so flippantly, "Oh, yes. I talk to God all the time." Do you realize what you are doing? You are approaching the Throne of Grace, the Almighty Creator of the universe, and you have the privilege of actually speaking to Him and He listens! Imagine trying to develop a relationship without talking to one another, or if only one person is doing all the talking. We have an active prayer life if we regularly spend time with God and talk to Him. Then we will better be able to discern His activity in the world and in our own life and be able to give credit where credit is due.

Finally, the fifth way to build our relationship with Jesus is through the testimonies of other Christians. How God is working in the lives of people all around you—not by just reading some wonderful story in a book, but in real life. It encourages us. We need to do more. In fact, this morning before the 8 o'clock service I asked a gentleman how he was doing, and he said, "I have to tell you, this week I had a miracle in my life." I responded, "Wow, what was the miracle?" He said, "The pain that I've been experiencing somehow just went away!" It made my day! Once again, something amazing had happened in this man's life that brought him joy and comfort, and he shared it with me, and that encouraged me.

Friends, building and nurturing any relationship takes effort, it takes patience, and it takes persistence. A lot of openness and some risk is involved, and it takes time. Your church can help facilitate that, and so can Christian writers and musicians and conference leaders, and many others. But the real work depends on us...and the Holy Spirit. Turn to the Spirit, because as Jesus said, He will remind us of all that Jesus taught us.

So, I pray friends, that the Holy Spirit prompts your heart to get to know Jesus as your highest priority. I know we have a lot of priorities, and they are important: making a living, raising kids, dealing with the grandkids, health issues, and any number of things, but when Jesus becomes the highest priority it impacts all the rest. I pray that the Holy Spirit will inspire you to relentlessly pursue a relationship with Jesus more than you have relentlessly pursued anything else in your life. Let's let Him have the last words. Jesus said, *"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you"* (Matthew 6:33). Seek that first and it impacts everything else and puts it all in the proper perspective. Second, *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me"* (Revelation 3:20). Share the intimacy of sitting down together and being together. And finally, *"If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him"* (John 14:7). ■

