

Holy One, help us to discover who you truly are within us, and who we truly are within you. May the light of Christ be for us your Wisdom and our guide. Amen.

Friends of God

I walked into class one day and sat down in my usual place. I was in seminary. I was ready. I had been a student or a teacher all my life. I think I had done my homework whatever it was. And I was ready - to listen. Then the professor told us that in class we would each write a sermon, start to finish. And it could only be one sentence, the *whole thing*. And we would deliver it to her and our classmates. She would give us 10 minutes to prepare. I thought I was ready for class! She set a timer and we started.



Christ the Teacher by Peter Koenig¹

I'm not sure how long my pen was poised over my paper, but eventually I was scribbling across it and doodling and pondering, as I thought, as if my life depended on it, okay, I am supposed to describe the reality that is God, the phenomenon of Jesus, and the mystery of the birth, life, death, and risen life of Christ, and why it matters... in one sentence. In one *concise* sentence.

The exercise, even before we started, got to the point. We spend a lot of time wandering around with our thoughts, trying to get to the point, to the heart of what it means to be human and alive and embodied and communal and deeply interconnected.

We are People of the Word, but most of the things that inspire us, for me, are without words: a look, a feeling, a laugh, a smile, a dance, a protest, a stand, a witness, and a presence.

All the rambling that we do in writing or in speech, or that I do, reaching for words to express the inexpressible love of God *falls away* with a simple question of identity. Who is Jesus? And why does it matter?

So, what do you think? Tell me, really. If you had to deliver the news, the *Good News*, the Gospel message, right here, in one sentence, today, right now or in 10 minutes, to everyone here, what would it be? What comes to mind? What moves through your heart? What would *your* one sentence be?

I would really like to know! Our lives, mine, yours, our lives together somehow depend on it. And you don't have to be that faithful to be sitting here. Whatever brought you in, if you have just a tiny, tiny bit of faith or mystery inside of you, then you have something to say! Something that matters. And I know you do. So, what would your one sentence be?

Okay, you don't really have to do this, but maybe at coffee hour, I will ask you. You've got an hour now not 10 minutes. Or I will ask you some other random time. Or you can just share with me whenever you're ready.

I'm certain you each have something extraordinary to say and to share. I am convinced. If I know you, I have already seen it. And if we haven't met, I am still convinced that you have something to express that is absolutely unique to you, precious, and vital to our shared path ahead.

So, what do we think together? *Who do we say that Jesus is?*

In the Gospel story, this is exactly what's happening; a timeless moment just like this one. Jesus, the teacher in a teaching moment, walking with his disciples on the way to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and asking them two questions. First, Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answer rather quickly, I think, probably wanting to get the answer right and not disappoint. John the Baptist! Elijah! One of the prophets! Then, Jesus asks the second question, not who do people think I am?, "But who do you say that I am?" Jesus really wants to know what they think.

So, who is Jesus to you, maybe in one word? Peter already took one: "You are the Messiah." So maybe you can do this one, spoken or unspoken, who is Jesus to you in one word? Messiah is already taken. What else?

Teacher, Prophet, Savior, Friend, Redeemer, Reconciler, Creator, Sustainer, Mediator, Intercessor, the Christ, Emmanuel, and my favorite, Wisdom.

And then there's one that I remember as a child. My first understanding of Jesus was as a lion. But that's another story, from "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe." That is when I first understood who Jesus was as a lion through the creative story by C.S. Lewis.

But my favorite today is Wisdom. Wisdom Jesus. Jesus the Wisdom of God; the one, so beautifully read today, who "... renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God..." (Wisdom 7:26–8:1) Jesus as the holy medium that makes us friends with God.

Figuring out who Jesus is is also about figuring who we are. Jesus might have asked, who do people say that *you* are? And then, who do you say that you are? And, who does God say that you are?

So many movements of the heart as we reach for what is wordless and inexpressible.

So, if you would like to know my one-sentence sermon, I can't really remember what I preached to my classmates that day. I was trying to find my notes but couldn't find them, but I do remember my one-sentence sermon was something like this: *You are wonderfully made, loved beyond measure, and called.* I think that's what I came up with and I preached to my classmates and my professor.

Did you notice, I left out Jesus! At least explicitly! *And* I left out all the bad stuff.

Again, in the Gospel story today, I would be just like Peter, pulling Jesus aside to say, okay, you're the Messiah but we're not going to talk about dying and death. Which is what Jesus does right away. Jesus is talking about his identity and his suffering, and then taking up our own cross and following him. We can spend a lot of time with the Gospel passage today.

And the Gospel news is always, always a shock. No matter how long and winding your journey has been within the church, within the world, the cosmos, all your relationships, knowing that there is goodness in the world, that the light is shining; and yet, still the Gospel news is always a shock.

Can you imagine me or Peter saying, Heh, Jesus, the Messiah is not about suffering and death and weakness? You don't know what you're talking about. The Messiah is strength, victory, power, beauty and goodness. Not death and weakness, and destruction, and suffering.

We skirt around the truth of our lives and our true identities all the time.

My idea of life is generally to be comfortable, secure, and safe. All the good things that God provides. And yet I know we live in a partial reality most of the time, or controlled reality, trying not to face our vulnerability and our insecurity, or our end.

And so we stand with Peter, and say, heh, Jesus, just letting you know that this what you're about. We get you: You're Social Justice Jesus, You're the Compassionate Jesus, You're the friend of the downtrodden and the lowly. That's all good.

And yet, still, Jesus rebukes his disciples and us because he faces unflinchingly the full reality of what it is to be alive as a human living being in this world. He lives the full human experience and reclaims *all* of our humanity and calls us.² Take up our cross, deny yourselves and follow me. Not easy thoughts, not easy actions.

What if this goodness, this really good news, you, me, all of us together, is a collective, creative force of the universe, as we participate in our very bodies in something we cannot grasp but we still yes to.

As the church, we hold on to what we know about the church, about ourselves, about Christ, about salvation, about the Messiah, about our journey of being followers.

We hold on to so many things in our daily lives: traditions, relationships, material things, status, norms, appearance, familiarity, routine, and ritual. All of this, beautiful and good and useful and well placed, and yet all of it is upended all the time when Jesus turns things upside down.

Throughout Scripture, Jesus will say, “You’ve heard it said.... but I tell you this...” He’ll say, “The law teaches this... but I tell you this whole other reality.... breaking in through you... because I am with you...”

And, then, there is this deep, beautiful wisdom; the sense of the Creator still creating, intimate, real and present; the One who knows us before birth, who knits us together in the womb, and whose presence is tightly bound with our own journey. This is our deeper identity beyond knowing.

And when we are on the threshold of death, when we face our own or with someone else, I think we can all agree that we are closest to God.

When we are in the midst of human suffering, we know, maybe not by ourselves but maybe together, that we are being carried.

When we face the lived realities of human existence, we find the face of Christ.

Together, we are the living Word expressing itself in ever new ways, right now, right here.

May this inner beauty become visible in our world through us and this moment.

May the Wisdom of God, in Christ, the light more beautiful than the sun, beyond every constellation, shine within you, within me, and all the Earth, in Jesus name,

Amen

¹ Peter Koenig, Christ the Teacher, from Art in the Christian Tradition, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <https://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=58509> [retrieved September 15, 2024]. Original source: Peter Winfried (Canisius) Koenig, <https://www.pwkoenig.co.uk/>.

² “For Jesus Christ to bring full humanity into communion with God, he must bear the fullness of human experience, including suffering and death. As Gregory of Nazianzus said, “that which he has not assumed he has not healed.” According to this interpretation, Jesus’ suffering and death are not an extrinsic necessity imposed from outside, but an intrinsic necessity, the outworking of God’s decision to enter into and reclaim the whole of human existence.” Martha L. Moore-Keish in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Bartlett, editors. *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 4: Season after Pentecost 2 (Propers 17 - Reign of Christ)*. Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition; page 175.

READINGS

Wisdom 7:26–8:1

For wisdom is a reflection of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
and an image of his goodness.

Although she is but one, she can do all things,
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things;
in every generation she passes into holy souls
and makes them friends of God, and prophets;
for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom.

She is more beautiful than the sun,
and excels every constellation of the stars.
Compared with the light she is found to be superior,
for it is succeeded by the night,
but against wisdom evil does not prevail.

She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other,
and she orders all things well.

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”