

Lake Shore Baptist Church Sermon Charlie Fuller
August 23, 2020

When someone resigns unexpectedly, things run through people's minds. I've been around church all my life. I know how it goes.

I've not done anything wrong. I've not had a moral failure. At least not beyond the ones we all have. I've not embezzled any money from the church. I don't have any untoward social media posts. The *church* has not done anything wrong. I've not been put under pressure from anyone in the church to resign. You have all loved Cindy and me wonderfully and we love you *very* deeply. I truly believe that my resignation is based on that love. It's my deep love for you that calls me to get out of the way and let you get the help you really need.

As I explained in my letter, I truly believe that you need someone with a deeper skill set than I have to lead you through the deep and vital conversations you need to have. That may be another transition pastor or it may be simply a consultant. But there are some truths that you must embrace to move forward.

Your future is going to look very little like your past. Try as you might, you can't change that. What's important is that you all learn to create places to have deep, honest, and vulnerable conversations. In other words, you need to work at loving each other more deeply and trusting each other more fully. The only way to effectively face the future is with a trusting togetherness that builds interlocking bonds of love within your wonderful diversity.

In order to do that, you need someone to help you. Someone who can come in from the outside, representing no one's agenda, and help you ask and answer some difficult questions.

You can choose not to do that. It's certainly your decision to make. But what is likely to happen is that you will simply ignore relational issues that will continue to crop up over and over again.

Look around this Zoom room. Click on the Gallery View. When the pandemic broke upon us, Sharlande did a quick scan of Lake Shore's regular attenders. She determined that around 90% of our folks were 60 years old and above. That was an important finding as we looked to respond to the pandemic. It's also worth noting as we look to Lake Shore's future. If 90% of our regular attenders are 60 and above, what will Lake Shore look like in ten years? Twenty years? Just pause and think about that for a moment.

Churches are closing all across the country by the thousands. They were the churches who were unwilling to recognize until it was too late that the world had changed, that their context had changed. Each and every one of them convinced themselves that they didn't need to change, that the future could look like their beloved past. They

believed that until it was too late. Until they didn't have enough people to carry out ministry or enough money to maintain their facilities.

I believe that one of the truly wonderful discoveries that some churches are making during this pandemic is that the church is not a building. Christ's church is a community. One that gathers in different places and different ways. It's also one that stretches around the world. As we discover that the church is not a place but a gathering of people, it changes everything. It means that our primary purpose isn't being purveyors of religious goods and services. It means that our buildings, our communal possessions, aren't our reason to exist. It means that our reason to exist is to come together to serve the cause of Christ. How we do that, what that looks like, how we work that out in practice will be unique to who we are. It will flow out of our giftedness and our *identity*. It will *reflect* our shared heritage, our history, but it cannot and must not be trapped in our history.

How do we find our identity? The first step is found in today's text.

This passage from Matthew is one of my favorites. It appears in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. I especially love its placement in Mark. It appears at the halfway mark. Jesus and the disciples have been together for a while. They've been traveling together and doing what they do: Teaching, healing, and feeding. The crowds had followed them just about everywhere. But now they're in Caesarea Philippi. They're out on the edge of Jewish territory. Jesus has them alone and away from the crowds. It's time to stop and reflect on where they've been, what they've done, and what they've seen and heard.

So, Jesus gives them a mid-term exam. And it's a single two-part question:

"Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

They answer, "John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets."

But the second part of the question is the core of the exam:

"But who do YOU say that I am?"

The truth here, it seems to me, is very simple. We can't know who we are – both as individuals and as communities of faith – until we have explored, wrestled with, and embraced the idea of who Jesus is. Who is this Christ, this Messiah, this anointed One? The one we call God's only Son. The One who quite literally changed the world and continues to do so today.

We must wrestle with who Jesus is even as we live in a world where there are many who have abused the very notion of Jesus, who have promoted a caricature of Jesus to serve their own manipulative ends. We mustn't retreat from the work of claiming Jesus

as the true Messiah even when preachers and other religious politicians use Jesus as a front for initiatives and behavior that is decidedly non-Christian.

We mustn't try to move forward with what we think is a Jesus agenda and leave the identity of Jesus behind. Jesus asks us, "Who do YOU say that I am?"

It is this identity that we must claim and, if necessary, redeem.

We work for the oppressed *because* of the person of Jesus.

We include ALL in our welcome *because* of the person of Jesus.

We call out for justice in our world *because* of the person of Jesus.

We mobilize our words, deeds, and actions for the common good *because* of the person of Jesus that dwells within us.

That's why we must continue to struggle with the identity of Jesus. How does Jesus reveal himself to us? As individuals? As a community?

A part of this wrestling is exploring the meaning of the spirit. We are an academic church. Our spirituality style is decidedly intellectual. We like to think things through, explore through the lens of thinking and rational thought.

But to claim the person of Jesus means also to acknowledge the limits of our intellectualism. Jesus transcends our thinking. And while today isn't Pentecost, we still must always celebrate and claim and wrestle with this Jesus present in the Spirit. We must continue to struggle with that which transcends our rationality, to acknowledge that this Jesus-following thing is both natural, and shall I say, *supernatural*?

And if we can acknowledge that following Jesus means embracing the supernatural, the world of the Spirit, we can more fully answer the question Jesus asks *us*, also: "Who do YOU say that I am?"

While a worthy exploration of the Spirit takes a lifetime and certainly more than the time I have left this morning, let's think about one thing related to the Spirit.

How do you know if the Spirit is present? The apostle Paul tells us that the Spirit leaves tracks. Like the deer that hang around my subdivision, there are signs that the Spirit of Jesus is present.

Paul says when the Spirit of Jesus is present you can observe things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

My prayer for Lake Shore is that we will continue a transition marked by these very signs of God's Spirit.

"Who do YOU say that I am?"

Amen.