

August 27, Ordinary 21A (Matthew 16:13-20)

Not everyone knows who Jesus is. Do his disciples?

by [Luke A. Powery](#) in the [August 2, 2017](#) issue

Names are significant. They mean something; they are identifying markers. If you don't know someone's name, you won't ever be able to call on them or to them. People have a first name and a last name. Some people change their birth names for various reasons; this wouldn't happen if names weren't significant and didn't matter. But they do matter. Names say something about who we are.

The politics of naming is important. What you are called and who gets to name you—these things set your place in the world and sometimes set you apart. Throughout history, we have seen names for racial and ethnic groups change. Those we call “African American” today were once called “Negro” and “colored” and “black.” But who made these changes? Who had the power to do so? And do individuals have the power to name themselves in this way?

Tiger Woods describes himself as “Cablinasian” to represent his mixed heritage. Some people don't like this because it seems like Woods is distancing himself from blackness. But he took it upon himself to name himself as he saw fit. He grabbed hold of the power to self-identify, even if others had other names for him.

A name will always say something about who we are, whether it be racially, sexually, denominationally, or otherwise. Christians with mixed denominational influences might call themselves “Bapticostal.” Their denominational identity is more complex, more beautiful, than just one totalizing name; it does not fit traditional categories. From the outside, people may see a simpler identity—or just a wrong one. But what is key is that individuals—under the watchful gaze of political powers—assume the power to name themselves. Their identity is their own, and they can make it public when and to whom they choose.

The time comes when Jesus chooses to reveal his true identity, his name, to his disciples. Jesus knows who he is, but he checks with his disciples to see what they and others are saying about him. Who do people say that I am?

Many people get his identity wrong; they call him John the Baptist, Elijah, or Jeremiah. Not everyone knows who he really is or even his real name. Some people think things about him that aren't true. They call him names, the wrong ones, names they made for him and not the one God created for him. Despite the rumor mill, Jesus holds his identity cards close. It's as if he doesn't want to throw pearls to swine. He doesn't want to reveal who he truly is because not everyone will be able to handle it. Jesus keeps his identity in the closet.

But he takes one intimate step toward his close friends, his disciples, hoping that they might really know who he is since they've spent so much time with him. There's no guarantee, but he asks them anyway. "Who do you say that I am?" He poses the question to his closest confidants because he knows that sometimes those closest to us may not truly know us, either. When Peter pipes up on behalf of the disciples, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," it's as if Jesus pours out a rock-steady blessing on him for naming him rightly. His closest friends get him, though many others do not.

So why isn't it time for the disciples to shout Jesus' true identity from the mountaintops? Wouldn't the world want to know that their redeemer has come? But Jesus is rightly in control of his identity, his name, and when and to whom he reveals it. He doesn't want his identity to be thrown around in coffee-hour gossip; it's too precious, too true, too powerful. Though he seems relieved that Peter knows his name, the timing is not right to spread this information further.

Instead, Jesus orders the disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah. He's dead serious about this, because he knows that he will suffer death for it. At this point, Jesus wants to remain in the closet to the world. Only his dearest confidants know the truth. Jesus does not feel safe enough to come out, so he decides to stay in the closet until a time of his choosing. It is his choice when and with whom to share his identity.

Jesus understands that coming out as the Messiah is a political and religious gesture. He's no fool. He knows that some won't like his name, won't accept it. Some will try to call him other names; they'll think he's crazy and try to fix him with prayer. He

knows that he'll lose followers and friends and family over what he calls himself, who he truly is. His name, his identity, will change things irreversibly.

So he entrusts his precious identity, "Son of the living God," only to dear friends. Peter can be trusted and is praised for it. But a person's identity can't be trusted with everyone. Coming out is a political act of freedom, but it is also deeply personal.

People want to be who they are as sons and daughters of the living God. But can we be trusted with their real identity and name? The timing may not be right for them to come out; that is their prerogative. But as their friends, we provide a safe space for the truth to be heard. And we should want to hear the truth, because the truth will set us all free. Jesus and our friends are not so much interested in what others call them; they want to know who we say they are. I hope our answers will reveal our hearts as safe space.