

## Who Is This?

Matthew 21:1-11

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I've often said that a good student is one who asks good questions. Good questions lead to profound discoveries. Good questions lead to the deeper truths. Anyone can ask a good question. Children ask questions that adults are shy to ask. One need not be a scholar to ask a good question. When Hunter Kramer was in fourth grade, he made an appointment to come to my office. He had a question: "What's the meaning of life?" From the moment he asked that question, I knew we would become spiritual friends.

In Matthew's version of the Palm Sunday story, it is the people in the crowd who are the good students. They voice the right question: "Who is this?" Who is this Jesus of Nazareth? And . . . not spoken but surely implied is the follow up question: 'and what does he have to do with me?' Perhaps I'm giving them too much credit for posing this follow-up question, but I've come to see that it's a nagging question, perennial question, a personal question, a question for believers and unbelievers alike. 'What does Jesus have to do with me?'

Because this is such a personal question, I wouldn't dare begin to try to answer it for anyone except for myself. But if I share with you how I have wrestled with this question, perhaps you will take the time to do your own reflecting. Many of you already have.

First, for me, Jesus is the one with the persistent question: Is this the highest ethical ground on which to stand, or is there higher ground waiting for me to choose? He is the one who cares about ethics and won't let me off the hook with anything but the highest possible standard.

I'm glad our New Century Hymnal includes the old Gospel song, 'Higher Ground.' It was written by Johnson Oatman, Jr. an insurance executive from Mount Holly, New Jersey. He taught his songs to church school children and then he lived his songs in the business world.

“I'm pressing on the upward way,  
new heights I'm gaining every day;  
Still praying as I'm on-ward bound,  
'O plant, me, God, on higher ground.’

In my South Dakota parish, the ranchers would feed their calves all summer and then haul them off to market in the fall. The auction barn was down the road about 20 miles in Faith, South Dakota. Of course, every pound mattered. The heavier the calf, the more income to the rancher. One year, some of the ranchers decided to stop along the way and have the calves drink as much water as they possibly could, so they'd be a pound or two heavier on the auction scale. This, of course, led to a discussion of ethics, of what it means for a person of faith to stand on the higher ground. It was thrilling for a young pastor to witness seasoned ranchers, church members, debate the ethics of this matter. These leathery skinned cowboys needed a pay check, but they also needed to get a good night's sleep.

Standing on higher ground doesn't make one wealthy; doesn't make one popular; it just allows one to sleep soundly through the night, knowing a life-giving choice has been made.

What does Jesus have to do with me? He's the one who challenges me at decision making time to look again to see if my ethics reflect what God intends.

Second, for me, Jesus is the one with the unavoidable question: ‘Is that as much of yourself as you can give?’ He keeps me up at night with that zinger. ‘Is that as much of yourself as you can give?’ The One who surrendered all of himself needles me with this question. I call it a zinger.

I remember driving into Hartford one day to hear one of my heroes of faith speak at Asylum Hill Church. When I heard Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, was coming to Hartford, I cleared my calendar! At that time, South Church volunteers were building a Habitat house off Windsor Street in the north end. We were feeling pretty good about the progress. We figured Mr. Fuller had come to thank us. In his speech, he referenced the five houses Hartford Habitat had constructed that year. “Next year,” he said, “build ten! I know you can do it!” He was certain we could accomplish this! Not too many people in the audience shouted, “Amen!” But quietly, in our cars, on the way home, we knew he was right. We had given up some of our Saturdays, but there was more we could do.

At the beginning, I thought I loved Millard Fuller for his vision to end sub-standard housing in the whole world. Later, I loved him for pushing me to see that I had not given as much of myself as I could give.

What does Jesus have to do with me? He’s the one who quietly thanks me for what I’ve given to God, then points out the mountains still waiting to be climbed.

Third, for me, Jesus is the One who invites me to take up my own cross and to follow him. 'To take up one's cross' has many interpretations. For me, to take up one's cross is to name the most unlovable person or the most unlovable situation or the most unlovable condition, and then to go and find a way to bring love to that person or that place.

The cross is the place where it's hardest to love. The cross is the place that is easiest to turn and walk away from. The cross is a place riddled with nail holes, laced with pain, splattered with sweat and blood. Yet, it is also a place of redemption, a place where love conquers rejection, where love conquers loneliness, a place where love conquers greed and envy, a place where love conquers all fear.

I often get out of bed in the morning with a destination in mind, a plan for the day, but I rarely get there because this Jesus guy steers me in a different direction, points me toward a place I'd rather not go, to a situation where loving will cost me something I may not be prepared to spend.

I think we don't often consider ourselves the person who is hardest to love. We tend to name someone else. Sometimes, to take up one's cross is to accept the possibility that I may be the one hardest to love, and that there may be something profoundly sacred about letting someone come and love me.

That day came for me in the spring term of my senior year in high school. The day is as clear as if it happened yesterday. My parents had been summoned to the school for a meeting with all my teachers. It seemed my grades were slipping, so they planned this "gang up on Dick" session. Suddenly, I was surrounded by the faculty. One said I wasn't working up to full potential. One said I was late with homework assignments. One implied I was lazy. One said I wasn't applying myself.

I had never felt so unloved in my whole life. Finally, Mr. Piazza said, and I quote, “Richard is excelling in French.”

The affirmation was so thick, so measureable, so needed. That day became a turning point in my life. One, lone, faculty member had witnessed something redeeming in me, and he named it out loud. I suppose it’s a stretch to say Mr. Piazza loved me. But that was how it felt to me. It was one of those events that, on reflection, I see has shaped by soul.

What does Jesus have to do with me? He is the one who pushes me toward the ones who are hardest to love. He is the one who shoves me toward the situations that seem most desperate. He is the one who invites me to take up my cross and follow him.

Especially in the Confirmation class, I find it is the ones with the best questions who get the most out of that sophomore year. On that first Palm Sunday morning, it was the crowd who shouted out the question, “Who is he? What does he have to do with us?” It is for all of us, individually and together, to wrestle with this most profound question. Let us do so in the greatest of hope. Amen.