

GETTING PERSONAL

When I was 4 years old, my parents joined Eden Methodist Church. My mom played the piano and my dad sang in the choir, and my brother, sister and I were there every week with them, enjoying Sunday school and refreshments – not necessarily in that order.

For the next 10 years, this was pretty much the case for us. The name of the church changed to United Methodist. We had four different pastors, but Ed Dunlavy was the only lay leader over those years. And then in 1974, our church hosted a Lay Witness Weekend.

About 30 people from all walks of life – teenagers, housewives, businessmen, retirees – came to our church from Indiana and Ohio. And Friday night through Sunday worship, they shared stories – some dramatic and some gradual – of God working in their lives.

And during that first evening, I probably nodded my head and thought, “I know what they’re talking about. I’m a Christian. I was confirmed last year. Yup, that’s me.”

But on Saturday morning, as the youth met for some one-on-one time with the teenagers from the team, I walked my cousin Ted.

Ted was the same age as my brother Kevin. We only lived about five miles apart, so we all grew up together. Our photo albums included pictures of Kevin and Ted as boys grinning ear to ear as they sat up in a tree in our backyard. There were Christmas pictures of all of us cousins gathered around the tree at grandma’s house – and of course, one of us was always crying or doing something to spoil the picture.

But when Ted reached the teen years, he was no longer in the pictures. He didn’t come to the family gatherings with his parents. Ted let his hair grow long. He didn’t smile at me when we saw each other at school. I don’t remember anyone ever saying what was wrong, but I heard enough whispers to know Ted’s life included substance abuse and run-ins with the police.

And now, here was Ted, walking into MY church. What was he thinking?

Well, unbeknownst to me, Ted was thinking about God. As our teen group shared stories around the table, Ted told stories that confirmed the whispers I had been hearing. He had been drinking; he had been abusing drugs. In desperation, his parents had shipped him off for a week to a Christian summer camp.

Ted figured he'd go there to escape his parents' nagging for a week. Instead, Ted had a life-changing experience when he met and accepted Jesus as his Savior. From that moment of acceptance, there were no more drugs or alcohol in his life. He now attended church with his parents and brothers, and sought more than anything else to honor God with his life.

And how did I feel about all this? Well, to be blunt, I was peeved. After all, Eden United Methodist Church was MY church, not Ted's. He hadn't attended before or since his conversion. And whereas I felt I was a Christian – or at least a United Methodist! – I had none of that sense of God's presence that Ted was demonstrating by his words or by the light on his face. And rather than being pleased for Ted, I have to admit I was resentful.

But that lasted less than 24 hours. As we met for Sunday morning worship, I came with a hunger for that relationship that Ted obviously had. And as I sat there listening to team leader Jack Eldred share his life story, I realized the difference between what the lay witnesses and Ted had and what I had with God was they had been confronted with the question Jesus puts to every disciple: “But who do you say that I am?”

When Jesus came to earth, it wasn't to create a church. It (thankfully!) wasn't to form church committees. Jesus came to earth so that those who confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior can have a personal relationship with God. And the first time this happened was at Caesarea Philippi as Jesus gathered with the disciples.

In the beginning of Matthew Chapter 16, the Jewish authorities known as the Pharisees and Sadducees demand a sign from Jesus to show his authority. Jesus says no sign will be given to them except the sign of Jonah – and those of us in the Bible study groups know all about that!

But then, Jesus withdraws from the skeptics and gathers with his disciples in Caesarea Philippi, a non-Jewish region. Here, with less possibility of distraction by the Jewish authorities or the curious crowd, Jesus can have a private conversation with his disciples. But he begins it in a rather off-hand manner by asking, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

Those like me who grew up in the 1970s remember a TV show called *Welcome Back, Kotter* about a high school teacher Mr. Kotter and his class of misfit students known as the Sweathogs. Most of the show’s popularity was due to young viewers who loved charming heartthrob student Vinnie Barbarino, played by the previously unknown actor John Travolta.

But my favorite student was Horshack, the geek of the group. There’s no way I can duplicate his honking laugh. But the other thing Horshack was known for was whenever Mr. Kotter would ask a question, Horshack’s hand shot up as he started hollering, “Oh! Oh! Oh!”

That’s how I imagine it was with the disciples when Jesus asked who the people believed Jesus was. Twelve hands had to have shot up in the air. “Oh! Oh! Oh! We know this one! We know this one! They say you are John the Baptist. Others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah.”

And then the disciples must have sat back smugly. The Jewish authorities might have their doubts, but the people are very clear: Jesus is as great as the greatest of their prophets, and possibly even the reincarnation of one of them. And if he were, then Jesus would be the one who was preparing the way for the coming Messiah. Messiah in Hebrew and Christ in Greek both translate as the same name: God’s Anointed One. The Messiah or Christ was expected to come and save the people of Israel.

But then, Jesus gets personal. It's one thing to be able to recount others' opinions. But now he asks the disciples point-blank: "But who do you say that I am?"

Never mind that second-hand information. What do they have to say about him? Never mind what they know about Jesus. Do they really know Jesus?

I suspect the initial answer from the disciples was not an enthusiastic Horshack response, but something more like Vinnie Barbarino's evasive, "What?" "Where?" "Who?" At the very least, there had to have been an uncomfortable silence as the disciples surely avoided eye contact and hoped Jesus wouldn't call on them.

But Peter – good ol' impetuous, shoot from the hip Peter – finally speaks up. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

This is a truly astounding confession. Unlike those who believe Jesus is as great as the greatest prophets, Peter says Jesus is elevated well above John, Elijah, Jeremiah and all of the others. Unlike those who believe Jesus is the forerunner of the Messiah, Peter names Jesus as the Messiah. And as if to erase any lingering doubt, Peter continues by calling Jesus the Son of the Living God.

And Jesus commends Peter for this leap of faith. Peter had faith before, having been raised as a Jew. He knew about God through the Law and the Prophets. But now, his faith has been transformed. He has gone from one who knew about Jesus – knew of his miracles, his teachings and his healings – to personally confessing Jesus as the Son of the Living God. His faith in God was now personal.

And true faith is like that: It is involved. It's not enough to mouth the opinions of others. It isn't even enough to describe Jesus as the one who takes away the sin of the world. No, true

faith means we have to grapple with the question, “Who do you say that I am,” and form a conviction that is genuinely ours.

And that kind of faith is transforming. For years, John Wesley had been a faith-filled man. He was a preacher’s kid who became a pastor himself in the Anglican Church. He had been a missionary to Georgia. He had founded a Holiness Club at Oxford which had created a methodical style of Bible study and prayer. In fact, he and other members were so methodical, they were ridiculed as “Methodists” by fellow classmates.

But it wasn’t enough. For all he had preached and all he had done, Wesley still carried doubt about his position with God. He didn’t feel sure he had done enough to warrant eternal life and he wasn’t sure how to make up that difference.

One evening, brother Charles persuaded John to go to a prayer meeting in Aldersgate. And there, as he listened to a reading on the Book of Romans, Wesley said he felt his heart was “strangely warmed.” He finally believed not that there was anything he had done or hadn’t done or could do that would make a difference in his salvation. He realized all he needed to do was confess Jesus as his Saviour – and in doing so, his heart and life were transformed.

Sometimes that transformation is a dramatic turnaround in a life like Ted’s; sometimes it is more of a gradual realization that God has been with us forever – an “ah-ha” moment that suddenly creates in us a new passion for God.

At the Lay Witness retreat, I realized it wasn’t enough that I could tell others what my parents and grandparents believed about Jesus. It wasn’t enough that I had near-perfect attendance at Sunday school and VBS. Those things were wonderful, but they left me with a spiritual hunger.

Ultimately, the question facing me was the same one that had faced Peter, John Wesley, Ted and countless millions of other people: Who do you say that I am?

Who is Jesus? Our answer can be so many things. He was a teacher. He was a good man. He was a healer. He was the model for principles the world should follow if we indeed want to make this an ideal kingdom.

But when we answer as I did that Sunday back in 1974, that Jesus is my Lord and my Savior, we have given the answer that changes us from on-lookers to participants; from members of God's household to sons and daughters.

It is all the difference in the world, when we know and claim God personally.