

Pastor Joe Polzin
Matthew 16:13-20
“Who Do *You* Say Jesus Is?”
Year A – Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 27, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus and his disciples enter the district of Caesarea Philippi, about twenty-five miles north of the Sea of Galilee. This is very likely the furthest out Jesus traveled in his entire earthly ministry. They are far from Jerusalem, and far from the influence of the Jewish leaders and religious figures. And after this point, as we'll see next Sunday, the rest of Jesus' ministry will be directed toward one destination: Jerusalem, and all that awaits Jesus there.

But before Jesus begins to head back, while they're still far up north, Jesus takes some time to pause, and to ask his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” They respond, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (16:13-14). It's a good answer, because that *was* what people were saying about Jesus. But Jesus was intentionally leading his disciples past what *others* were saying about him, so that they would answer for themselves. He says to them, “But who do *you* say that I am?” (16:15)

If you've noticed, the identity of Jesus has been *the* prominent theme in the most recent several chapters of Matthew's Gospel. It started back in chapter 11, while John the Baptist was in prison before his death, he sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (11:3).

Then several things happened in the chapters that followed. Tangles with Pharisees over whether Jesus was someone who had Godly authority, as they demanded signs from him that he was who he said he was. Jesus was rejected in his hometown of Nazareth (13:53-58), where they couldn't believe a “carpenter's son” could do such things. Herod Antipas, who had John the Baptist killed, began to believe that Jesus was John raised from the dead, now with miraculous powers (14:2).

We saw in the feeding of the five thousand the profound statement that Jesus is Israel's God, who is still feeding His people in the desert (14:13-21). Right after that, we saw on the Sea of Galilee that Jesus is the Creator God who tames and walks on the water. And the disciples in the boat worshiped him, saying “Truly you are the Son of God” (14:33). We even saw a Canaanite woman, the last person you'd expect to come forward and confess Jesus as the “Lord, the Son of David” (15:22), acknowledge him as just that.

All this had been said about Jesus, all the things said about his identity, about who he was, and all that had happened. And now, at the end of all of that, Jesus turns to his disciples, and asks one climactic question, “But who do *you* say that I am?”

You know, this question is still being asked, and answered, today. The exact identity of Jesus is still very much at the forefront of people's minds. And we know, as Christians, nothing is more important than the answer to that question, who Jesus truly is.

Various surveys throughout the years have measured what the American perceptions of Jesus are. The Barna Group released a recent one in 2015 that showed that while 92% of Americans believe Jesus was a real, historical person, only about 56% believe Jesus is God. And

for the younger generation, that number was only 48%, less than half.¹ This means that the door is wide open, in many people's minds, for answers to the question of who Jesus is.

Some say Jesus was a good man with solid moral teachings. Others agree he was a historical, influential rabbi, a Jewish teacher. Others say he was a model of social activism, challenging the traditional political and religious powers of the time, pushing change and reform. Still others, especially from other religions, such as Islam, Jehovah's Witnesses, or Mormons, acknowledge Jesus as an important person, a prophet or even a demi-god, but not the Second Person of the Triune God. And many in our pluralistic culture today say that Jesus is a fine person to follow for your own spirituality, but he's only one option among many other good ones.

And yet, all of those views are woefully insufficient, if not flat out wrong according to Scripture. There is only *one* answer that is sufficient, and kudos to Peter for getting it right. You know, a lot of times, we give Peter a lot of flak...Okay... most of the time he deserves it. And not to surprise you, but next week, in the verses that immediately follow *this* passage, Peter is not exactly going to demonstrate himself as the model of faith. But let's not jump the gun. Let's give him credit where credit is due, at least for a week. After all, Jesus does!

Simon Peter replied to Jesus' question, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And it's an incredibly powerful confession that Peter made of who Jesus is, as it had been revealed to him. First, he acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God. That Jesus is sent by God the Father, being one with Him, to accomplish His will and purpose here on earth. And second, for the first time in the book of Matthew, although it's been heavily suggested at times, a person confesses that Jesus is, in fact, the Christ.

Which means we should probably be clear as to what "Christ" means. "Christ," or *christos*, the Greek word for the Hebrew, *mashiach*, or "Messiah," means, the "anointed one." Now, certain people were anointed with oil in the Old Testament to designate them for a particular task among God's people: namely, kings, prophets, or priests. But the Messiah, the Christ, was going to be more than just another king, or prophet, or priest. He was going to be *the* king, *the* prophet, and *the* priest.

So, when John the Baptist asked Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come," he was specifically referring to the promise of the Christ, the "anointed one." And so, Peter confesses, that although many believed Jesus to be a great guy, an influential teacher, a religious reformer and leader, and even a prophet in a long line of prophets, Jesus is much more than any one of those things. Jesus is not just another *one*. Peter is confessing that Jesus is *the* one. The fulfillment of all who had come before. He is the *Christ*, the Son of the living God.

"And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it'" (16:17-18).

Some of you may be aware that what Jesus says right here in these verses is of interest to our Catholic brothers and sisters in Christ, who state that Jesus is indicating the primacy of Peter, and his importance as the future bishop of Rome, that he would come to be known as the first pope. After all Peter, in Greek, means "rock." Traditionally, Protestants argue that Jesus is saying that the rock upon which he builds his Church is not Peter, but on the *confession* that Peter has made, that Jesus is the Christ.

¹ Barna Group, *What Do Americans Believe About Jesus? 5 Popular Beliefs*. April 1, 2015
<https://www.barna.com/research/what-do-americans-believe-about-jesus-5-popular-beliefs/>.

Perhaps there's a little more to consider about that, however, and here's what I mean. I do *not* think Jesus is setting up Peter to be a pope here. This Scripture is clearly not about Peter. It's very apparent that this has all been about who *Jesus* is, and what the appropriate confession of *him* should be. But, Jesus *is* calling attention to what Peter has said, and seems to be associating him with what the Church, the assembly of Christ's saints, will be built upon. "You are *petros*, Peter, and on this *petra*, rock, I will build my church."

Now, Jesus isn't saying, "On the office of pope I will build my Church." But at the same time, a confession about who Jesus is made by someone who is saying it. Jesus is saying that on Peter, as a "Christ-confessor," as one who speaks the truth about Jesus—that Jesus is not just one of many, but the one Christ—on *this* Jesus will build his Church. On *all* those who confess the truth about who Jesus is.

And the Church today continues to be built upon every Christian who, by the faith given to them by God through the power of the Holy Spirit, shares with the world that Jesus is the Christ. And, in case we underestimate how powerful this confession is, Jesus says, "And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

When we are Christ-confessors, when we believe and confess that Jesus is the one sent by his Father to save and redeem the whole world, the one sent to liberate this world from the darkness that had us in its grip, the one sent to break the power of the devil, the power that death and sin had over us, when we confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, there is no power, no rule, no authority that can stand against the truth of that confession.

Satan can muster all the forces he can possibly gather, every demon he has garrisoned in the fortifications of hell. And as they stream out of the gates of Hades, on the attack, deploying everything they possibly can, with the sole purpose of taking down Christ's Church, they will ultimately be broken and defeated by one simple phrase, uttered from the mouths of the faithful: "Jesus is the Christ."

He is not one of many. He is not simply a good man or a good teacher. He is not a motivational speaker, or a promotor of proper ethics, or even one option of salvation among many. *He is the Christ*. The one who was sent by God to offer his life for your sins, because you couldn't earn your own righteousness before God. And he did this so that you could spend eternity, not bound in hell with the devil, which is what we deserve, but freed to heavenly joys and everlasting life.

That's a pretty powerful confession, isn't it? And yet, too often, we confess our faith as if we're saying something we should be ashamed of. Too often, we act as if the confession of Christ is *not* the thing he builds his Church upon. Too often, we shirk from our responsibility to confess Jesus as the Christ to those around us, to our family and friends, afraid of what they might think of us.

Brothers and sisters, we have the most powerful answer to the most important question that has been, is now, or ever will be asked: Who is Jesus? And knowing the answer to that question, knowing that Jesus is the Christ, how could we ever be silent?

Well, I'll tell you why. It's because of sin. Our sin. Sin causes us to doubt and be weakened in our faith. We need repent, and ask for forgiveness. And because Jesus is the Christ, we are forgiven. That's why he came. To assure you of your forgiveness. He's given the keys of the kingdom of heaven, the keys to forgiveness itself, to his Church, so that we may know that we are indeed forgiven, and so that we may also announce God's forgiveness to one another.

Having been forgiven, we then are led by the Holy Spirit in our sanctified lives as Christians, to go out and continue to confess once more. To speak the truth about who Jesus is,

and what he came to do for us. And to have the privilege to watch as Christ builds us up in our confession of him, and as he builds up his Church upon this truth. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.