

Pastor Joe Polzin
Matthew 16:21-28
“What Is the Christ?”
Year A – Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 3, 2017

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

I'd like to ask you to think back to your school days. For some this will be a little easier than for others, but I'm guessing all of us can remember, or at least imagine, a time when a big test was coming up. You know, that test that was going to determine your grade for the quarter? Now imagine that this isn't your best subject. For me, that would have been Math. For you, maybe English, or History, or Science.

And so, in order to pass the test, you have to pull out all the (*ethical*) tricks in the book. Something like some memorization techniques. If you can just memorize the equations, memorize the dates in history, memorize the tenses of the verb, then there's a *chance* you can put down the right answer on the test paper. The trouble with this could be, however, although you may have gotten the answer right on the test, in the end, you may not have truly understood the subject before you.

Peter got the answer right. In the verses immediately before our Gospel reading today, there is the great confession that Peter made when Jesus asked his disciples, “But who do *you* say that I am?” And Peter responds, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:15-16).

And we heard last week that this is the climactic moment from chapters 11-16 of Matthew's Gospel that had been focusing on just that question, who is Jesus? There were lots of opinions. But Peter got the answer right. Jesus, the Son of the living God, is the Christ, the Savior who had been promised to Israel, who had now come. But Peter shows today that, although he got the answer right, he still didn't truly understand the man before him.

Last week, our Gospel ended with verse 20 of chapter 16, “Then [Jesus] strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.” That's an interesting command, right after Peter has the correct answer about who Jesus is. Why the mystery? Shouldn't they shout the news about Jesus from the rooftops?

Well, it becomes clear in the verses that follow, that although the disciples could *vocalize* the right answer about Jesus being the Christ, they would still need to learn what it actually *meant*. Which is why, in verse 21, it says, “From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.” Jesus was beginning to teach them just what being the Christ truly meant.

Verse 21 is what many commentators and scholars note as the *turn* in Matthew's Gospel. If you have your own Bibles with you, you could even draw a line between verse 20 and verse 21. There's a distinct difference between what came before and what comes after. Before, Jesus' identity was being revealed by the Father to those around Jesus (cf. 16:17). After, Jesus would show just what that identity meant, what being the Christ means. Which is why the theme of his death and resurrection will dominate the rest of the Gospel. This is what it means to be the Christ.

And undoubtedly, the disciples would have been many thoughts, many opinions, many imaginings about what *they* thought the Christ would look like and what he would do when he came. But now that he was here, it's obvious, a Christ who goes to suffer and die, to be raised again, doesn't fit into their preconceived notions.

So Peter decides to say something. He takes Jesus aside, as if all Jesus needed was a little private correction and a pep talk. And Peter "began to rebuke him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you'" (16:22). Peter hears God's divine plan for His Christ from Jesus, and Peter's immediate reaction is to deny it, to rebuke his Lord, and offer him what he believes is the better alternative. Jesus reveals the way of the cross, and Peter feels it lacks a little glory.

The sinful audacity of Peter cannot be overstated here, as evidenced by Jesus' response, which is harsh and unyielding towards Peter. "Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man" (16:23).

Peter's attempt to dissuade Jesus from his mission to die and be raised again wasn't simply misguided. It was in *direct* opposition to God's plan of salvation. And it shows that when it comes to God, and His Son, Jesus Christ, there is no middle ground. There is the truth in Jesus, as revealed by the Father through the Holy Spirit, and then there is the opposite of truth, which is nothing less than diabolical – nothing less than the workings of the devil himself.

Last week, when Peter confessed Jesus to be the Christ, we said how this confession still stands today in opposition to all that the world says about Jesus. They might say that he's simply a good man, or a good teacher, or a good role model. But saying anything about Jesus other than that he is God, and that he is the fulfillment of the promised Christ, the one sent to save us from our sins, is completely insufficient. That was last week.

This week, Jesus explains what it *means* to be the Christ. But notice, this time it's is not in opposition to what the *world* says about him. Rather, it's in opposition to what the disciples, the followers of Christ, the insiders, assumed about him. And so today, we consider, exactly what it is *we* think it means for Jesus to be the Christ. How often do we *seem* to know the right answer, yet not truly understand who he is?

Unfortunately, there is no lack of errant explanations about Jesus among Christians today. And sadly, you'll find these among the teachers, the pastors, the authors in Christianity, as well as those who are the disciples, the followers of Christ.

Many Christians describe Jesus to be our personal life coach, that his purpose is to sit on the sidelines, giving us the encouragement and the strength to make it through the day. Many Christians describe Jesus to be our spiritual "handyman," that his purpose is to come into our lives so that he can fix our problems and shortcomings and make everything run smoothly again. Other Christians describe Jesus to be the great blessing-giver, and by that they mean that his purpose is to reward our faith with various material blessings in this lifetime; that all Jesus wants is for us to be happy, healthy, and wealthy, and living our best lives now.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, these are teachings of popular Christian authors and speakers, who mainstream Christianity puts out as must-hear, must-see, must-read. This tells us, at the very least, that we always need to be careful and discerning, comparing what is said about Christ to what God has said about Christ, through His Word.

And the problem with all these interpretations is that none of them demand a Christ who must go to Jerusalem, suffer many things, be killed, and on the third day be raised. No, these all demand from Christ the "things of man," the things that would satisfy our sinful desires and our

earthly ambitions. Jesus himself asks, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” (16:26)

In stark contrast, Jesus says that the “things of God” have to do with the true Christ, who has come to suffer, be killed, and be raised again. And why? Because Christ has come to deal with the ultimate problem from which we suffer. And the ultimate problem isn’t that we lack encouragement, or that we face job problems, or financial shortcomings, or even that we aren’t as healthy as we’d like to be. No, the underlying problem, the problem that we can do nothing about on our own, is that we are “dead in our trespasses” (Eph 2:1, 5), “ungodly,” and by nature, “enemies of God” (cf. Rom. 5:6-10). Our problem is sin.

In our sinfulness, we make demands of Jesus, to be the type of Christ *we’d* like him to be. To do the “things of man” we’d like him to do. To satisfy what our sinful selves deeply desire. To bring me happiness, health, and wealth. But in his grace, Jesus came to be the true Christ that he knew we needed. To do the “things of God” he knew needed to be done. To satisfy not our sinful desires, but the will of God, which provides for us an eternal satisfaction that we could never have known that we needed, much less attempt to provide for ourselves.

Jesus willingly suffered, and took your sins to the cross, so that he might forgive them. By his death, Jesus has forgiven you. And on the third day, he rose again, showing that the payment for your sins has been accepted by the Father, and the death that used to be rightfully yours to suffer for all eternity is now destroyed and defeated.

And if Christ’s mission was to suffer and be killed at the hands of evil men, what makes us think that we who follow him should expect anything different? Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (16:24). And the thing about following is that you locate yourself behind whoever it is you’re following. And you’re not the one who decides which way you’re going.

Peter physically located himself in front of Jesus, between Jesus and the path Jesus was going. That’s not a position of a follower. That’s the position of a hindrance. It was the position of Satan. He was trying to dictate where Jesus would go, what type of Christ he would be. But Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan!” Neither Peter, nor Satan, would be able to keep Jesus from fulfilling his God-given mission to be the Christ who would suffer and die for the sins of the world, providing the atonement for the problem of sin once and for all eternity.

Following Jesus involves denying yourself, that is, denying your sinful nature. Denying who your sinful nature demands a false Christ should be. Instead, you allow Jesus to tell *you* who he is. And he points you to his cross. And so, the life of the Christian involves taking up your own cross, which means taking up the burden of following Jesus. It’s the burden of not always understanding, not always having answers. The burden where life actually becomes more difficult as a Christian, because you know that the sinful world, which did not accept the true Christ, will not truly accept you either.

And being a Christ-follower means that your days are not going to be filled with everything happy, healthy, and wealthy. But your days *will* be filled with a promise you have from your Savior. He says to you, “For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Jesus promises you, that even though you may lose your life, that you may lose what this world’s definition of a successful life is, that in him, and what he did for you, you *will* find everlasting life. 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.