

Who Are You
United Church of Broomfield
August 27, 2023

Matthew 16: 13-20

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14 And they said, “Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15 He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16 Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” 17 And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” 20 Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

As Matthew tells it, Jesus has been curing lots of people and miraculously feeding thousands. But he needs a break from all that, especially after a demand from religious leaders to “show them a sign from heaven.”¹ He says, in response, that no sign will be shown to this “evil and adulterous generation” except for the sign of Jonah.² What’s the sign of Jonah? Bible scholars believe Jesus is referring to the three days Jonah spent in the belly of the fish and to the three days Jesus himself will spend in a tomb after his crucifixion.

Jesus wants to get away from all that controversy and to avoid, at least temporarily, immediate death at the hands of the puppet king, Herod Antipas, who already had murdered John the Baptist. So, Jesus gathers his disciples and heads north to the city of Caesarea Philippi. It’s at the foot of Mount Hermon, which usually remains snowcapped even in summer. This is about a 25-mile trek to a remote location that gives Jesus and his disciples time to talk.

Even though Caesarea Philippi was considered a Gentile city outside the authority of King Herod, it had an interesting religious history that makes Jesus’ question about who he is take on a broader meaning. Scholars tell us there were a dozen or more ancient temples in the area once used for worship of the god Ba`al. A cavern in a nearby hill was said to be the birthplace of the Greek god of nature, Pan, which explains why Caesarea Philippi’s original name was Panias. Also in Caesarea Philippi was a huge marble temple built by Herod the Great to honor none other than Caesar. Jesus, as the incarnate one and only God of creation, surrounds himself and his followers with evidence that for a long time, humanity has been making various guesses about who God really is. And the people who have been coming up with this or that answer had built monuments to those answers.

In what we today might call an interfaith setting, Jesus uses a term he sometimes calls himself and he asks his disciples this: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They give several responses, all of which pretty much miss the point. So, he asks them the more important question, “Who do you say that I am?”

¹ Matthew 16:1

² Matthew 16:4

That's the question that faces all of us, whether we're already believers in Christ or not. The answer to that question can and does shape our lives, no matter how we answer it. It's no surprise that the impetuous Peter answers first: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Yes, says Jesus, Yes.

The problem with Peter's answer is that he seems to have one idea of what it means that Jesus is the Messiah while Jesus has quite a different idea. Peter's idea of **who** the Messiah is and most importantly **what** the Messiah must do is mistaken, but his is not an ignorant mistake. Though the concept of messiah was fluid in some regards, the future that Jesus sketches for himself clearly violates it. The Messiah was not to be rejected, much less slain, by the people he would come to save. On the contrary, the Messiah would rally them, just as Joshua and David did, against enemies holding the Promised Land against God's will.³

Peter draws on the accepted Jewish tradition of what the long-promised Messiah would do and be;

- a king, anointed by God.
- a perfect teacher of God's laws who would rule over all of humanity with kindness.
- a political leader who would be inspirational and judge righteously
- a warrior who would destroy oppressors.

But God clearly has a different plan. God decided that Jesus' calling cannot and should not be limited to the restoration of Israel's territory and sovereignty. Instead, Jesus' mission is to include the restoration and redemption of the whole world, a concept Peter doesn't yet grasp — but will.

Two thousand years later we grasp this broader idea. We can see that what Jesus meant to do was to free us, redeem us, give us sight. We can see that Jesus was serious when he said that when he was lifted up, he would draw humanity to him, would let all of us see that the kingdom, heaven, or reign of God that he was proclaiming started then and there, immediately.

That's why Jesus began his ministry not by promising to deliver Israel from the Romans or by promising people wings in order to fly around heaven. Rather, he was saying that the reign of God starts now; for us that is today, right here, with justice and mercy and compassion and love. He insisted that right now we can get a foretaste of what that kingdom will look like when it finally comes in full bloom.

The question for us remains the very one Jesus asked: "Who do you say that I am?" And let me suggest that the word "say" there is not limited simply to verbally identifying Jesus' job or divine identity. Rather, it carries with it the implication that if we say Jesus is the Christ, God's own Messiah, our answer immediately brings with it the responsibility to follow this Jesus, to care about what Jesus cares about, to love the brokenhearted, the poor, the wretched of the Earth, the people without hope. For what breaks God's heart must surely break ours. Who do you say that Jesus is? -- Who are you?

Saying that Jesus is Lord means nothing if it doesn't affect how we live. Christianity is a difficult religion. It's full of demands because it's full of grace. It offers forgiveness, acceptance, love, and mercy but it doesn't offer us what German martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." Rather, it calls us to devote ourselves not in part but in whole to living by kingdom values; Jesus' teachings and earthly examples.

Who is Jesus? Well, who are you? It's no wonder that there are so many people today that are disenfranchised with the church, religion, and the Christian faith. Why should I believe in a church that protects pedophile priests? Why should I follow a faith in which its followers value gun ownership more than children's lives. Why

³ Jack Miles, *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God* (Vintage Books, 2001), 141.

should I trust a faith where supposed Christians would say that “God Hates Fags?” Why would I want to associate with hypocrites who preach about caring for the homeless, but yell, “not in my backyard,” when developers propose low-cost-high-density” housing projects.

To answer, “Who are you,” also answers, “Who is Jesus.”

Will we fail every day at “living like Jesus did” despite our best efforts? Of course, we will. Peter, who **correctly** answered the question of Jesus’ identity, failed and failed and failed too. Only two verses after today’s reading (v.22), Peter **incorrectly** and misguidedly instructs the Messiah NOT to go to Jerusalem and NOT to suffer at the hands of the elders, and NOT to sacrifice himself to be killed so that he may be raised. Peter rebukes the Messiah and says, “GOD FORBID IT, LORD! THIS MUST NEVER HAPPEN TO YOU.” Peter knows the answer but misunderstands it entirely. God forbid it? Peter, if you really understood you’d know that God isn’t forbidding this, but, in fact, is ordaining and blessing this!

Do you recall how Jesus responded to Peter? “Get behind me, Satan!” A bit harsh, right? I mean, Peter was only trying to protect his friend. Jesus’ response to Peter is tough, perhaps cruel, but it demonstrates the importance of knowing and understanding the Messiah. Peter – you know, but you don’t know. If you claim to know the Messiah, then to suggest that the Messiah NOT be willing and ready to die for humanity’s salvation, is evil – ANTI-GOD. Peter got it wrong. We get it wrong. Peter failed, repeatedly. We fail, repeatedly. And Jesus forgave and forgave and forgave.

Jesus says of Peter, “upon this pillar of certainty and doubt and misunderstanding and incredible compassion and bravery and cowardice and fear, in all of its wholeness and opportunity, in all of its brokenness and agony, THIS is what I’m going to build the church on” on Peter, the rock.

Remember where Peter was when he denied Jesus three times? He was in a courtyard in Jerusalem next to a charcoal fire. Remember where Peter was when the resurrected Christ later asked him three times if Peter loved him? He was on the shore near a charcoal fire. So, on that latter day, Jesus gave Peter not only a new future but also a new past. How so? Well, after the second scene in which Peter was by a charcoal fire, he wouldn’t have to remember his earlier denial by such a fire. Instead, when he saw a charcoal fire he could remember the job Jesus gave him: “If you love me, feed my sheep.” That’s our job, too. Our focus is not on mistakes, shortcomings, and failures of the past, but rather on Jesus.

There are those who are hungry – you feed them.

There are those who are homeless – you house them.

There are those who are oppressed – you advocate for them.

There are those who are hurt, damaged, and excluded – you love them with grace, comfort and mercy.

Who are you?

You are a beloved child of God. You are a disciple of Jesus Christ – the Messiah. You are a part of Jesus’ church, an assembly of believers built upon the rock/Peter.

Know it. Understand it. Do it.

AMEN
