

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Matthew 16:13-20 (NRSV)

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.

A woman and her husband were invited to her rich aunt’s house for dinner. The wife insisted that the husband treat the aunt politely. The aunt’s dessert was an original recipe. It was terrible. When the husband was asked how he liked the dessert, he responded, “I must say this is the best cake I have ever tasted.”

On the way home his wife told him that she had not meant that he had to lie to her aunt.

The husband replied, “I told the truth; I said I MUST SAY this is the best cake I ever tasted.”

In today’s scripture, Jesus asked a very important question and he was looking for an honest, truthful answer for good reason. Would there be someone to continue his ministry?

As I often do, let’s take a few moments to look at the context for this scripture in Matthew. Prior to this account of Jesus’s life, we find that he had been in a place called Magadan. He left there with his disciples, crossed the Sea of Galilee, and landed in Bethsaida. There he healed a man born blind. From there he and his disciples went to Caesarea Philippi.

Caesarea Philippi was an interesting place for Jesus and his disciples to stop and take a break. This territory at the time was ruled by Philip. The influence of Greek and Roman culture was everywhere, and pagan temples and idols thrived.

It was here where Jesus chose to get away from the usual crowds who followed him to spend some time alone with his disciples. He knew his time living in the flesh were almost over. He had so much to teach them, although there were many things which he would not fully understand until after the resurrection.

But there was one particular problem confronting Jesus at this time. The problem was – was there anyone who understood him? Was there anyone who recognized him for who he was? Were there any who, when he was gone physically from this world, who would be able to carry on his work and labor for the building of his kingdom?

This was very important because it was crucial for the survival of the Christian faith. If there was no one, then his work was uncompleted; but if there was at least one person, Jesus knew his work would continue. It was important to Jesus to get down to the nitty-gritty and ask his disciples the hard question of who they believed him to be. A lot hinged on how they responded.

So, it’s in this setting where people worshiped other gods and idols, that Jesus asked the few who had been following him—his disciples—who they believed him to be. It’s quite a contrast: a city with many people who were lost and unknowing about the one True God, the word of God, the truth that Jesus brought to the world vs. the few who hopefully understood that

Jesus was their Savior who came to save them from their sin and teach them that lessons he came to teach us.

It's really not a lot different from our community and our world, full of people worshipping other gods such as self, power, wealth, government and politics and even things that may sound crazy like television, video games, sports, things that dominate people's attention, that deprive them of opportunities to really know Jesus, and that eliminate them from the pool of the faithful who continue Jesus' ministry to spread the Gospel. It's in this same kind of setting where temptation and sin abound, threatening our interests and faithfulness that Jesus asks us, "Who do you say that I am?"

In the text, Jesus works his way towards his ultimate question by asking them, "Who do people say that I am?" They replied saying that some say he was John the Baptist. Herod Antipas, the king that ordered the beheading of John, was not the only man who felt that John the Baptist was so great a person that it might well be that he had come back from the dead.

The disciples said that others said he was Elijah. When they said this, what they were really saying was that Jesus was as great as the greatest of prophets. The people looked to Elijah as the greatest prophet of all time, and they were saying that Jesus was the forerunner of the promised Messiah. They heard Malachi's words saying that God's promise was "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes" (Malachi 4:5). To this day, the Jews still expect the return of Elijah to announce the coming of the Messiah. In fact, during the Passover Seder, an empty chair or at least a glass of wine is set at the table for the prophet Elijah. So, the people back then looked on Jesus as the one who came to announce the coming of the Messiah.

The disciples also told Jesus that some people say he is the prophet Jeremiah. Those who thought this were remembering the Israelites' time in exile. They believed during this time, Jeremiah took the Ark of the Covenant and the altar incense out of the temple and hid it in a cave on Mount Nebo; and that before the arrival of the Messiah, Jeremiah would come back and return these items to them and God's glory and favor would return to them.

The people who believed that Jesus was one of these men were paying him a high compliment because they recognized him as an important person, the forerunner for the yet to come Messiah, but not the actual Messiah. Jesus likely knew this and, of course, it was a disappointment. As I said earlier, he needed to know that there was at least one person who knew who Jesus really was and would then be able to carry on his ministry.

So now came the all-important question to the disciples—the ones who he had been teaching through words and example, the ones who should know him best. "And you—who do you say that I am?" Jesus asked. After probably a few moments of silence to take in what Jesus was asking and consider how they would respond, Peter spoke up and said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." I can just imagine Jesus' sigh of relief when Peter gave that answer.

Even though we know Peter did not totally understand exactly what the meant, he knew Jesus was the Messiah. After this proclamation, he struggled to understand Jesus' predictions of his upcoming death and resurrection. He found it unfathomable and unacceptable that his Messiah would suffer and die. We also know that Peter later denied knowing Jesus. Peter, who was far from perfect, obviously still had a lot to learn.

As it was for Peter, we too may have a great understanding of Jesus and who he was and continues to be. Yet Jesus asks us too, "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus wants to know

whether he can count on us to continue his work of spreading the good news. There will never be an end to the need for disciples.

And, like Peter, we may find it easy to proclaim and really mean it with all our hearts because as was the case with Peter, God has revealed to and placed in our hearts the truth that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. But sometimes when the rubber hits the road and being faithful becomes a challenge, we realize that we also still have a lot to learn.

When I do a baptism for one who in doing so proclaims their faith and acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah and their Savior, I always remind them that in doing this they have not come to an end of learning and growing in their faith.

They actually have just begun a new journey, one that will include learning more of the word, growing more intimately in their relationship with Jesus and their other brothers and sisters in Christ, and answering the call God makes on their lives to serve using their particular gifts. There will be times when they may fall flat on their faces, but Jesus will pick them up, forgive them and reveal a new lesson to them. He continues to do this for all of us as we continue our faith journeys.

This is exactly what Jesus would have to do again and again for Peter. Jesus did this even after he passed on his blessing for Peter's confession of faith. Jesus told Peter he would be the rock on which Jesus would build his church and no evil would ever destroy it. Jesus would be the all-important cornerstone. It is faith like Peter's, imperfect and growing, that is the foundation of Christ's kingdom. And we are a part of the construction too as we make our confession of faith—even as imperfect disciples—cleansed and revived by Christ.

In verse 19, we read that Jesus told Peter he would give him the keys to the kingdom of heaven. This is understood by some to mean that Jesus was giving Peter the authority to carry out church discipline, legislation, and administration. Others believe this means the keys gave him the authority to announce the forgiveness of sins. I guess that's why we hear all those jokes about Peter meeting the new candidates for heaven at the pearly gates to decide whether the person has done what is right and good to enter heaven.

Still others say the keys may be the opportunity to bring people to the kingdom of heaven by presenting them with the message of salvation found in God's Word. And that is exactly what Peter did. After the resurrection of Christ, he continued Jesus' ministry of taking the good news to those who would listen.

He was an advocate for sharing the message with the Gentiles just as Paul and Barnabas were doing. We read in Acts 15 about some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees tried to stop Barnabas and Paul from doing this to anyone who was unwilling to be circumcised. So, there was a big meeting in Jerusalem. Peter was in attendance and after listening for a while he stood up and said, "Friends, you well know that from early on God made it quite plain that he wanted the pagans to hear the Message of this good news and embrace it—and not in any secondhand or roundabout way, but firsthand, straight from my mouth.

And God, who can't be fooled by any pretense on our part but always knows a person's thoughts, gave them the Holy Spirit exactly as he gave him to us. He treated the outsiders exactly as he treated us, beginning at the very center of who they were and working from that center outward, cleaning up their lives as they trusted and believed him."

As we see from this example, the religious leaders thought they held the keys of the kingdom, and they tried to shut some people out—those they deemed unacceptable. This teaches us that we cannot decide to open or close the kingdom of heaven to anyone, but God uses us like he used Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and all who proclaim Jesus as their Messiah and Savior, and live

into that belief to help others find their way into the kingdom. To all who believe in Christ and obey his words, the doors are swung wide open.

We learn from Peter in this text that Jesus needs faithful, committed people who are not afraid to make a confession of faith that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God—their Savior—to continue his work to take the good news to everyone who needs yet to hear it and come to know Jesus. He is willing to forgive and use imperfect people who are willing to learn and grow from their experiences, becoming even more capable in their abilities to do God's work. Jesus needs us. So, who do you say that Jesus is? If your answer is the same as Peter's, get ready for a wonderful ride. It will change you and your focus on your life's journey. The rewards will be boundless blessings from God. Amen.