

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – August 23, 2020

Introduction

The story of Jesus and the disciples at Caesarea Philippi is told in all three of the Synoptic Gospels [Mathew, Mark, and Luke]. It is important because Jesus asks his disciples two questions: **Who do people say that the Son of Man is? & Who do you say that I am?** In today's sermon, I will focus on the second question because it forces the reader to answer.

Matthew's version of the questions at Caesarea Philippi also has direct implications for church polity. 'Church polity' is a way of describing how we understand the nature of the Church. The discussions turn on Jesus' response after Simon Peter professes that Jesus is 'the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' Jesus replies, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And 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. ¹⁹I 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.' In Greek, Peter's new name is a word play on 'petros' which means 'rock.'

The medieval Catholic Church understood these words to mean that Peter himself was the foundation upon which the Church would be built. The leaders of the Church are the direct spiritual descendants of Peter, the first universal bishop of the Church. This unbroken line of succession continues as bishops and priests are consecrated through the 'laying on of hands' from one generation to the next. Through its bishops and priests, the Church is given the authority to use Office of the Keys for pronouncing God's forgiveness of sin.

The Reformers took a different approach. Martin Luther and others understood the Church in terms of mission. In the Gospel for today, the Reformation churches argued that Jesus identifies Peter's 'rock-like faith' as the true foundation. This foundation of faith empowers the followers of Jesus to exercise the Office of the Keys in his name, empowering the Church to tell the story of Jesus to the world.

Church history shows that both traditions have shaped church history. Today's Roman Catholicism is '**structural**' in nature because the Church can only exist where clergy are present. The clergy, they suggest, are the direct line to Peter who was understood to be the first bishop with churchwide authority. This is commemorated by the laying on of hands by local bishops. The leaders of the Reformation used a '**functional**' definition

that identified the Church as a group of people whom God has called together for the purpose of spreading the story of Jesus to the world in accordance with the final words in Matthew's Gospel: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' Therefore, Lutheran ecclesiology described the church as a community of faith where 'two or three are gathered' in the name of Jesus to do the work of God's Kingdom.

Both understandings of what it means to be Church are helpful. We must remember that both ideas have positives and negatives. And because the Church, although called into being by Jesus, is a human organization that is subject to human brokenness. We must also remember that the Kingdom of God and the Church are not synonymous. As believers, we are saved, not by our theologies or ecclesiologies, but by our faithfulness to Jesus.

Pastoral Note

It was good to gather for worship outdoors at both Bethel and Immanuel last Sunday. Our next outdoor services will on the following Sundays, weather permitting: **August 30, September 13, and September 30. Service times will be Bethel - 8:30 and Immanuel - 10:30.**

Also, it is important for you to know that I have nearly completed the Ministry Site Profile for our Parish that is necessary for our participation in the call process. I am 'blending' your input and that of your church councils in a unified profile that accurately represents the Bethel-Immanuel Lutheran Parish. When this is done, I will submit to our congregational presidents and to our respective church councils for revision and approval before sending it on to the NE MN Synod office.

**In Christ ✝,
Pastor Steve**

Gospel – Matthew 16:13–20, 24-26

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷And 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. ¹⁸And 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. ¹⁹I 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." ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah . . . ²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

'Rumors'

Let us pray. Father of all mercies, God of all consolation, come to the aid of your people, turning us from our sin to live for you alone. Send your Holy Spirit upon us this day so that we, like Peter, might come to know Jesus as *'the Christ, the Son of the Living God.'* Empower us as we attend to your holy Word and grow as a community of faith doing the work of the Kingdom. We pray in the name of Jesus, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

When darkness finally came, it was still 90 degrees outside. There was no getting away from the heat . . . not even at night. But at least it was quiet and dark . . . No drill sergeant in our faces yelling at us. When the lights were turned out at the Harmony Church area of Ft. Benning, we could talk to each other if we whispered. Even at night, the drill sergeants kept a close watch on their new recruits.

Most often, the conversation was what you'd expect from lonely young men a long way from home. We talked about our real lives . . . about what was going on at home: girlfriends . . . family . . . school . . . food. You know what I mean; anything to remind us who we really were. **But sometimes, we whispered about what was happening to us.** We all had heard the rumors: Sgt. Ross was going to be replaced because he was working us too hard . . . Tomorrow was the big day, we were going out into the field for two weeks . . . The inspector general was coming because the food was no good and people over in the 3rd Battalion were sick . . . **'A'** Company had to retake their PT tests because their scores were so low. Sleep was slow in coming because of the heat and because of our fascination with rumors . . . Rumors that seemed so interesting in the dark of the night, but always proving untrue in the morning. Deep down, I think, we knew; but every night, we continued to talk . Maybe that's what kept us going.

Whenever people come together, there are rumors. Rumors are a fact of life. Sometimes, they are approximations of the truth; but more often than not, rumors are pure speculation embodying someone's ignorance of what is really happening. When gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill in California in 1848, everyone had a relative who had heard the story from someone who had heard it from someone else. The rumors were that everyone got rich and that gold nuggets lay among the rocks just waiting to be scooped up by the basketful. The facts were that the surface gold was gone in a month and that most of the Forty-niners who came to get rich in the goldfields ended up either broke or working for one of the big mining conglomerates.

Like I said, rumors are a part of life; even here in our small communities. They are a way of making conversation, a way of speculating about the future. Rumors may contain a grain of truth, but it is truth embellished with the speculation of others. Today's Gospel has an air of mystery about it because of rumors about Jesus. It seems as if there is a lot of confusion about who Jesus is. The crowds certainly do not know. The disciples are uncertain. As Matthew begins, it seems as if everyone had heard a *Jesus story: Reports of healings . . . Strange teachings about God . . . And miracles that defy explanation.* People were wondering what was true and what was not. *Was Jesus just another self-proclaimed miracle worker with Messianic pretensions, or was he who he said he was?* Even after discovering Jesus' identity, Peter and the disciples are uncertain what it really means for them. After all, they reasoned, one cannot believe everything they hear. Sometimes, it's true; but more often than not, the story has either grown in the telling, or is a blatant fabrication from the start. One can never be too careful.

This was the problem Jesus faced in Caesarea Philippi. Even his disciples did not know what to make of him. So one day, when they were near Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked them, **'WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM?'** It was no accident that Jesus asked his disciples this difficult question while they were in Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi was an international city populated by people of many nationalities. Each culture brought its own religion and archeologists tell us that the hillsides were dotted with little temples and shrines to foreign deities. There is a touch of irony that Jesus asks his disciples this question when they are surrounded by the false gods of many nations.

When Jesus asked, 'WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM?' his disciples must have been surprised. After all, Jesus must have heard the same rumors as they did. Some said 'John the Baptist,' because he called the people of God to repentance. Others said 'Elijah,' because it was common knowledge that the prophet must come again before

the Messiah comes. And there were still others who said ‘*Jeremiah*,’ because Jesus spoke only of God's judgment. Perhaps, Jesus was all of these; or perhaps, none of these. Whatever the case, Jesus received exactly what he asked: the opinions of others. The disciples were not theologians. And as far as they were concerned, the discussion was over. It was not their place to judge what they heard.

To their discomfort, however, the discussion was not over. Jesus had yet another question, ‘BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?’ One can only imagine the uneasy silence as the disciples looked from one to another. To answer was to commit oneself; and to commit oneself was dangerous with Jesus around. But Jesus insisted, ‘**WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?’**

It soon became obvious that someone must answer. Simon Peter broke the silence. ‘You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.’ and Jesus answered him, ‘**BLESSED ARE YOU SIMON SON OF 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 POWERS OF DEATH SHALL NOT PREVAIL AGAINST IT.**’

It is helpful, I think, to look carefully at Peter’s words because his faith journey is typical of all disciples, past and present. Without a doubt, Peter was the leader of the twelve. Each Gospel gives him precedence over the other disciples. Both the Acts of the Apostles and Paul’s letters regard Peter as a ‘*leader*’ of the early church. But in Matthew’s Gospel, he also fulfills another role. Peter is the prototype of all believers to come. **His life is a mixture of faith and doubt.** In faith, Peter walks upon the raging sea to meet his Lord; but in doubt, he sinks. On the road to Caesarea Philippi, Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ; but in Jerusalem, he denies that he even knows him. Matthew holds Peter up as typical of all believers – a curious mixture of strength and weakness when it comes to discipleship.

To acknowledge Jesus as ‘the Christ, the Son of the Living God’ is to take him seriously. If there is a criticism of modern believers, it is that we are ‘*convenient Christians*’ – Christians who have lost the excitement of their commitment to Jesus; Christians who always seem to be too busy with the ‘*other things*’ of life to take a risk because of their faith. Oh yes, we profess belief in Jesus, but we are unwilling or unable to give him precedence in our lives.

Why? I think we’ve lost our way. We have done quite well for ourselves. For the most part we can do just about everything we want to do. **But there just doesn't seem to be time for God and the Church.** We have become consumers who demand, not only

quality, but also quantity. And there's no end to our appetite for 'things.' We have a spiritual hunger, but are skeptical of God and the church. In God's place we seek 'something to fulfill' our need for religious experience that makes no demand on our time or money. The needs are still there. We are still lonely; we are still frightened by our own mortality; and we still wonder if our lives have meaning. **Discipleship Lite** is not fulfilling because it is not the real thing.

When Jesus asks, 'BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?' he's getting up close and personal. He is asking us to look at our lives; he is asking us to 'give him a chance;' he is asking us to acknowledge our spiritual hunger and hopelessness.

'BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?' For some reason that day, Peter screwed up his courage and answered. **'You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.'** This was no wild guess; Peter did not just **happen** upon the answer. According to Jesus, it came to Peter from God's own Holy Spirit. Human agency had nothing to do with it. Today, the same confession of faith is still possible because God alone is its source. **'UPON THIS ROCK, I SHALL BUILD MY CHURCH AND THE GATES OF HELL SHALL NOT PREVAIL AGAINST IT.'** The miracle of God's mercy is that he grants this revelation over and over again to sinners like you and me. **To see Jesus as the Christ** is to see ourselves as sinners. **To see Jesus as the Christ** is to acknowledge the false gods we serve hoping to gain salvation. **And to see Jesus as the Christ,** is to be forgiven and saved.

Peter's gift is also our gift; but with the gift comes a commission. Alone, a confession of faith is nothing; it needs to be implemented. And Jesus said to Peter, **'I WILL GIVE YOU THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN, AND WHATEVER YOU BIND ON EARTH SHALL BE BOUND IN HEAVEN, AND WHATEVER YOU LOOSE ON EARTH SHALL BE LOOSED IN HEAVEN.'** Peter was commissioned to hold the *Office of the Keys*. Since we are successors in faith to Peter; since we are the Church, the *Office of the Keys* is also given to us. Along with Peter, we are given the authority to loose and to bind sin.

On Communion Sundays, we invoke the Office of the Keys as we confess our sins to each other. And if our repentance is from the heart, the words of absolution will loose the sins that are choking us to death. Our commission to the *Office of the Keys* is not something for use only within the community of faith. Instead, this holy office is an instrument of proclamation. We are commissioned to share the saving story of Jesus Christ with all who will listen. We are committed to proclaim that there is forgiveness, and wholeness in Jesus.

We must be a community who loves and accepts others without question because Jesus did. We must speak clearly about the sin and brokenness in our own lives and in the world around us because Jesus did. We must live in such a way that the love of God shines through us into the darkness of the world because Jesus did. When the world asks, ‘Who do you say that Jesus is?’ there can be no hesitation. There is only one answer. ‘He is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God . . . He is the One who died so that we might live.’

So what does this mean for those who follow Jesus? Jesus answers, ‘IF ANY WANT TO BECOME MY FOLLOWERS, LET THEM DENY THEMSELVES AND TAKE UP THEIR CROSS AND FOLLOW ME. FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO SAVE THEIR LIFE WILL LOSE IT, AND THOSE WHO LOSE THEIR LIFE FOR MY SAKE WILL FIND IT.’ When we take our crosses to follow him, something strange happens. We discover that we are not alone. Jesus is trying to tell us that his cross is intertwined with ours. We discover that the One who dies is the One who gives life. Like Jesus himself, we are to be signs that God is active and in the process of redeeming our broken, sinful, and hurting world.

Rumors? I don’t think so. We need only look at the cross and the dying form of the One who loves us to know the Truth our lives depend on. Amen.