

Who Do You Say That I Am? Matthew 16:13-20

Norwalk Christian Church, August 24, 2014, Year A, Proper 16

Prayer:

God of revelation, mere flesh and blood cannot reveal divine truth; only your Spirit can give that gift. Be in my breath and voice, be in our ears and understanding, that through these words your Word may be known. Amen.

If you were here last week, you heard Marti do an excellent job wrestling with a difficult text that tops the lists of “tough sayings of Jesus,” the story where Jesus calls a Canaanite woman a dog, and the woman begging for the crumbs of God’s mercy. If you have no idea what I’m talking about...well, ask Marti.

You also may have heard Marti confess that she was originally going to preach today, but on Thursday last week, we switched Sundays, leaving her stuck with that sticky passage.

Well, after wrestling with *this* text all week, I’ve decided that I don’t want to switch after all. Give me the story of Jesus calling a woman a dog any day, over this jam-packed text! This text is my penance for throwing that much easier text upon you last week. There’s so much here, and this text has so much baggage, I’ve struggled with what say.

It’s almost impossible to read this text and avoid the baggage of centuries of Christian debate over the identity of Jesus. It’s one thing to say, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” All Christians can agree on that simple, yet Great confession.

But it’s another thing when we start talking about what we mean by that confession, when we start explaining what Messiah and “Son of God” means, and start trying to figure out all the details of how the virgin birth was possible, and how he walked on water, and did he really, bodily raise from the dead...by the time we’re done parsing it all out, no one agrees with anyone about anything!

There was a time in the early church where they were deeply divided over the question Jesus asks the Disciples. They all agreed that Jesus was the Son of God, but they couldn’t agree what that confession meant.

One group believed that Jesus, being the Son of God, meant that he was fully God, one with God, eternal just like God, that there never was a time when there wasn’t Jesus. Another group, led by a Priest named Arius, believed that Jesus was God’s first creation, but not the same as God, and there was a time when there wasn’t a Jesus.

In the 4th century, the Roman Emperor Constantine called all the church to meet in the city of Nicea to work out this disagreement. Tensions at that meeting were so great, that,

according to the legend, one bishop known as St. Nicholas (yes, it was that St. Nicholas), punched Arius in the face because he believed the wrong stuff about Jesus. Now, I don't care if you are Saint Nicholas himself, if you punch someone over your belief in Jesus, you've got it all wrong!

But the division doesn't stop there. This text is also central to what has divided Catholics and Protestants, the non-Catholic Christians, for centuries. Catholic teaching suggests that this text is the moment when Jesus makes Peter the first Pope. The keys to the kingdom were handed to Peter, which made him Pope, and those spiritual keys have been handed down from Pope to Pope from then until now. Now, we Protestants have a hard time explaining exactly what is going on between Jesus and Peter here, but whatever it is, we're pretty sure it has nothing to do with him being a Pope.

Now, all that, that's historical baggage. I can deal with all that; that's not what troubles me. It's my own baggage that I struggle with when I read this text. I struggle with this text.

As I've said before, I come from a Christian tradition that was all about giving the right answers. The Christian life was a test, and if you didn't get the answers right, you failed the test, with hell to pay! So when anyone, even Jesus, asks me what I believe about anything, I get the cold sweats.

I much rather the first question Jesus asks: "Who do people say that I am?"

When the Disciples are asked that question, you can't stop them from talking:
 "Oh, I've heard some people say that they think you're the resurrected John the Baptist."
 "Someone the other day was asking me if you were Elijah, who's come back to usher in the last days."
 "Well, I've heard people refer to you as the new Jeremiah."

This, I can do. I can talk all day about what everyone else thinks about Jesus. Well, the Catholics believe this, and the Baptists believe that, and Muslims say this, and Jews say that, and my church growing up taught this....

But then Jesus turns the question on them...on us...on me:

"Okay, but who do you say that I am?"

Silence.

I wish we knew how long the silence was before Peter eventually broke it. Seconds? Minutes? I'm sure it felt like hours. Peter eventually speaks. Peter, for good or bad, is usually the first one to speak. I don't know if he says what he says enthusiastically, confidently, timidly? But Peter answers: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Yes! Simon! Yes! Blessed are you, for flesh and blood didn't reveal this to you, but God did. And who are you? Well, you are Peter! You are Rock! And on this Rock I will build my church!"

It's a simple confession. Maybe it's much simpler than we make it out to be. Jesus doesn't ask Peter to parse his terms. And we will see next week, that Peter doesn't even know what he means when he says, "Jesus is the Messiah." But still, Jesus simply praises Peter's confession.

Maybe we don't have to have it all figured out. Maybe we don't have to deal with all the baggage, and work out all the answers to the theological questions about who Jesus is, and what it means for him to be the Son of God.

So, if it's that simple, then why does the question still make me sweat?

"Who do you say that I am?" It's such a vulnerable question, isn't it? Because the question is not really about Jesus...it's about me, about who I am. What do I believe is most important? On what will I wager my life? And how will my life change in response to that belief?

That's the kind of baggage that makes me really want to avoid this text. Maybe that's why we've used it for so long as a theological argument and fodder for disagreement and disunity. Punching someone in the face over an argument about Christ is much easier.

This text gets personal. It asks *me* the question. It demands something from *me*.

Because, if I say that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, then I must change. I must become something new. Simon was transformed into Peter, a rock. Who will I become? What will I do? To make this great confession demands that I follow after Jesus. But where will Jesus lead? And am I willing to risk it all to follow him?

If you're into Science-Fiction movies, it's that scene from *The Matrix*, where Morpheus gives Neo a choice between swallowing two pills. "This is your last chance. After this, there is no turning back. You take the blue pill - the story ends, you wake up in your bed and believe whatever you want to believe. You take the red pill - you stay in Wonderland and I show you how deep the rabbit-hole goes."

Or, if Sci-Fi is not your thing, it's that moment in *Les Misérables*, when the old Priest hands the silver candlesticks Jean Valjean stole back to him, telling the authorities they were a gift, and by this act of grace, he changes Jean Valjean's life forever.

It's the first time you hold your newborn child in your arms, and on their face you see every fear and doubt and vulnerability you've ever had. And you realize that being a parent will be the most terrifying thing you could ever be, that you will never, ever be the same again. And yet you cry tears of joy.

To Confess that Jesus is the Christ, is to begin a journey, a journey that will take you right into the midst of the joys and pains of being human, and take you all the way to the cross, but then to resurrection.human

It's not about getting it right all the time. And having all the right answers. And understanding everything. You will make mistakes. You will learn. But what's important is that you enter the journey.

In a moment we will sing 2 verses of the old hymn, "The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ our Lord." So what would a church, built upon this confession, look like?

I imagine such a church would look a lot like Jesus looked. A church that hung out with the people Jesus hung out with. A church that offered forgiveness like Jesus offered forgiveness. A church that ate meals with everyone--even those with whom they were not supposed to eat.

It would be a church that loosed the bonds of the law, and of hate, and of violence, as it bound up people in the grace and forgiveness of God.

One things for sure...when a church takes seriously the confession of Christ, then everything must change.

"Who do you say that I am?"

Maybe silence is the best response to this question. For if Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God, whatever that may mean, how could we not lay down all the baggage we carry, and hold on tight as we follow Jesus into the journey of a lifetime?

Let us sing number 272, verse 1 and 2.