

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
Pentecost XII
August 27, 2017
Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church
Richmond, Virginia

Matthew 16:13-20

When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “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 in heaven. 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. 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.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

+ + +

I loved Seminary...loved college for that matter. Being able to focus on topics that were of tremendous interest to me, and focus on them day after day, made me happy.

At Seminary, we were drinking water out of a fire hose...lots of subjects, coming at you fast... Biblical languages, Old Testament, New Testament, Theology, Church History, Ethics...and on and on.

Every field has its specialized lingo, of course. Teachers have it, construction workers have it, lawyers have it, doctors...Seminary was no different. Along with the subjects, we were busy learning a new way of talking about things. It got a little ridiculous...which brings me to a favorite Seminary memory.

It is related to the Gospel for today. And it was a cartoon...with Jesus speaking to the disciples. The caption went:

And Jesus said unto them, "And whom do you say that I am?"

They replied, "You are the eschatological manifestation of the ground of our being, the ontological foundation of the context of our very selfhood revealed."

And Jesus replied, "What?"

Ah...Seminary...sometimes I miss it. But you know, the question Jesus asks in the gospel this morning... "Forget about what everybody else thinks....Who do YOU say that I am?"... that is of course the question we must all answer, and the answer matters.

I've told you the story before, but it comes from one of my religion professors in undergraduate school at the University of Richmond. He said, "You can't act on a fact until it rests in a belief."

To illustrate this saying he told a story that went something like this. Once upon a time there was a person from a big city in the USA, a college educated person, who found himself traveling Africa, and staying for a while in a very isolated village with no electricity, or what we think of modern conveniences or medical care.

He noticed that the people of the village were falling ill at an astounding rate, and many were dying. The visitor, utilizing some of his own knowledge and expertise, determined that the cause was with the village well...the water was tainted.

That is the fact...the well water was causing the issue. What the visitor did next depended on what he believed. If he was...I don't know...let's say he was a neo-Nazi...then he just keeps his mouth shut, because the people of

the village were people of color and he thinks the world would be better off without them.

If however, he valued all human life, he would tell the people what he had discovered and set about helping them to find a way to purify the water. You can't act on a fact until it rests in a belief.

And the second half of that is, "What you believe matters."
The facts matter. What you believe matters.

The question of the moment is, "Who do you think Jesus is?" Peter, in the gospel says, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Messiah, anointed one, Christ in the Greek, was a popular topic in the first century amongst the Jewish faithful. To quote Bruce Springsteen, "The people had been waiting in vain for a savior to rise up from the streets."

Some saw the savior, the messiah, as a warrior king. Many saw him as the one "who would purge the Temple and establish true worship. Everybody who believed in such a coming king knew that he would fulfill Israel's scriptures, and bring God's kingdom into being at last, on earth as it was in heaven. But nobody had a very clear idea of that all this would look like on the ground."¹

Jesus accepts the title for himself, but he also tells his disciple James the word. First of all, Jesus didn't want to call unnecessary attention to himself from the authorities. And second, Jesus had some unique ideas about how to be the messiah.

Peter also says, "You are the son of the living God." "It's important to be clear that at this stage the phrase 'son of God' did not mean 'the second person of the Trinity.'

¹ Matthew for Everyone: Part Two, Tom Wright, page 5 – 6.

There was no thought yet that the coming king would himself be divine... (at the time the story happened) the phrase, 'son of God' was a biblical phrase, indicating that the king stood in particular relation to God...

(Now...) Very soon after Jesus' resurrection, his followers came to believe that the same phrase had a whole other layer of meaning that nobody had...imagined."²

And for us, as children of the Creeds, the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed...which express the ongoing understanding and the continuing revelation of God in the church...Jesus is God from God. The orthodox view is that God was in the Messiah Jesus, reconciling the world to himself.

Why does it matter? Well...if you just think that Jesus is a great human teacher, along side of a long list of great human teachers...and remember...for all their greatness...human teachers and sages...do not all agree with one another...then that has implications on how you are going to live your life, how you are going to interpret and respond to the facts of your existence.

"...Tibetan Buddhists believe in the transmigration of souls. When someone dies, they suppose that the soul of that person goes immediately into a different body, the body of a child born at the same instant. This belief becomes vitally important when their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, dies. A search is made for a boy born at the moment when the great leader died; and that boy is taken away and brought up as the new leader."³ You can see how their belief drives what they do. Same for us...we just look at things differently.

For us, we see in Jesus this perfect union of humanity and of divinity. If we want to know what God is like, we can look at Jesus. Jesus healed people.

² Ibid page 7.

³ Ibid page 5.

He was a preacher and a teacher. He was not a pushover, not by any stretch...he got angry and drove people out of the Temple.

Most importantly Jesus died on a cross, living out his creed of turning the other cheek, making the ultimate sacrifice in the belief that violence only leads to further violence...that those who live by the sword, die by it.

And we believe, on the third day, God raised Jesus from the dead, in the fullness of his being...showing us that our hope was not escape from this world, but in the transformation of it...showing us that in God's grace death becomes the gateway to new life...fullness of life, body and soul.

Believing these things...we ponder the facts of our world and existence. Knowing God as we do, we say YES to Christ Jesus as we seek and serve him in all persons, as we love our neighbors as ourselves, as we strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being. We persevere in resisting evil and when we fail, we turn again and beg forgiveness.

Knowing God as we do, we say NO to the spiritual forces of wickedness, NO to the evil powers at work in this world which seek to corrupt and destroy God's beloved creatures...we know those evil powers when we see them with their torches in the night slandering the very family of humanity that gave us Jesus... AND...we say NO to all that is within us that draws us from the love of God.

All these things, all these ways of living, the way we deal with all the facts of our lives flow from this: We believe in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus asks each one of us: "Who do you say that I am." Our answer matters. Our answer comes not just from our lips...but from our lives. Amen.