

Who Do You Say I Am?
A Sermon on Matthew 16:13-20
Proper 16
August 23, 2020

Introduction

Sometime mainline Christians are accused of being soft on Christ. We are not good at evangelizing. We are so focused on accepting people of other faiths that we don't want to offend them by talking about Christ. We don't like to talk about miracles. We focus on Christ as a wisdom teacher and soft-pedal the part about being the son of God.

Today's text is a good corrective for us. It asks to address how Christ is the center of our faith.

First Move: Peter's Confession

This story is a turning point in the Gospel of Matthew. There has been conflict with Pharisees in last the several chapters.

The story is set in Caesarea Phillipi. It is on the northwest boundary of Galilee, about 20 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. This is the farthest from Jerusalem that Jesus will take the disciples

Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do they say the Son of Man is?" Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man. The Son of Man is the eschatological judge. When the study of the Historical Jesus began 150 years ago, the consensus was that Jesus did not refer to himself with such an exalted title. It was given to him by the faith community after the Resurrection. Scholars today are divided. Increasing numbers believe that Jesus did in fact refer to himself as the Son of Man; that made it easier for his followers to see him in that role after the Resurrection.

The disciples give responses that the Jewish people believe Jesus to be John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, a prophet. That is inadequate. Jesus is more than a prophet.

Jesus is forming a new community that knows his true identity. In today's text, he uses the Greek word for church for the first time. The church is formed in response to Israel's rejection of Jesus.

Jesus then asks the disciples who they believe he is. Peter confesses that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. This is the confession of faith that Disciples

of Christ make when we are baptized. It is the confession that I ask new members to make when they join our congregation.

A lot is packed into this confession. Let's unpack it.

"You are the Χριστός." This can be translated as, "You are the Messiah." Χριστός is not a common word in Greek. It means the Smear One. Kings were smeared with oil when they were coronated. It was a sign that they would bring fatness to the land. The Christ is anointed by God to bring life to the people.

"Son of God." The disciples had already confessed that Jesus was the son of God after he walked on water. So this is not new information. Son of God in Matthew means that God is uniquely present in this one.

"Son of the Living God" or "the God who lives." Some Jews thought that God had been silent since the days of the Old Testament prophets. Peter affirms that God is still active among us. Our God is the God of life.

Jesus pronounces a beatitude upon Peter. "Blessed [are] you, Simon Bar-Jonah." There is no verb. Jesus is pointing out that Peter is already blessed. Jesus calls Peter by his birth name, Simon. Bar-Jonah means son of Jonah. Peter's father apparently was named Jonah.

Jesus says that Peter is blessed because Jesus' true identity was apocalypsed to him. It wasn't because of any special insight that Peter had. God chose to reveal it to him.

Jesus turns from what has happened in the past to what will take place in the future. He calls Peter the rock upon which he will build his church. Peter is the rock because of the confession of faith that he has made.

Jesus says that the gates of Hades will not prevail over the church. Hades was the same as Sheol in Jewish belief. It wasn't a place of punishment; that was Gehenna. Hades was the abode of the dead. The church would share in the everlasting life of God. When the new age dawns, the church will continue to live.

Christian folklore interpreted giving Peter the keys of the kingdom as meaning that he was the gatekeeper to heaven when each person dies and he decides whether to admit them. That's not what this text originally meant. The kingdom of the heavens, which is what Matthew called the kingdom of God, refers to earth when the new age dawns. It is another sign that Matthew believed the end was imminent; Peter would be present then. Peter is given the authority to bind and loose. That probably means that he is given authority to interpret the Law and Jesus' teachings in the kingdom. The church needs an interpreter to help it understand Scripture. Roman Catholics believe that the popes have succeeded to that role. Protestants understand ministers as fulfilling the role of interpreting Scripture for the congregation.

Jesus orders the disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Christ. From this point forward in the gospel of Matthew, the story will turn to the road to Jerusalem and the teaching focuses on the disciples, helping them to understand the Passion. The disciples will be the only ones who know the true identity of Christ.

Second Move: A People Divided

It is 74 days until the election. It is hard to get away from politics. It is a divisive time. People are afraid that there will be a meltdown after the election, no matter who wins.

Christ can help bring Christians together. He should be the lens through which we look at politics.

Our friends outside the church may worry that we are mixing religion and politics. They don't want us to force our religious beliefs into the political arena.

We have to be able to express our faith in a language that they can hear. People shut down when you start quoting Scripture to them. We can talk instead about the underlying ideals. Instead of talking about the kingdom, we can talk about the values in the kingdom. We don't have to mention the kingdom when we do it.

All political philosophies are based on ideals and principles. That is part of the problem with politics today; it is hard to see any underlying principles at work other than naked political power.

Conservatives, historically at least, believe in the constitution, traditions and norms, morality, equality, liberty and transcendence. Progressives believe in economic justice, racial justice, diversity, protecting the environment, and meeting basic human needs.

Democrats tend to look at government as being the answer to our problems, while Republicans trust in the free market. Christians should see both of those as inadequate. We look to Christ and the kingdom of God for transcendence. That is where we get our values. We want our democracy to start looking like the kingdom of God.

Some of those values are humility, hospitality, neighborliness, compassion, mercy and gratitude. We don't see those values reflected in our politics. It is a rough-and-tumble arena. It has become a struggle for naked political power. Winning and ruling is what matters. Political partisans say that is justified because their side will bring about the policies the country needs.

To have real democracy takes more than laws. It takes a virtuous people. Our founders recognized that. They knew that democracy was a fragile thing. It had never lasted wherever it had been tried.

Jefferson envisioned yeoman farmers as the backbone of democracy. They were the non-slaveholding owners of family farms. They would educate themselves and take their civic responsibilities seriously. They would be virtuous; they wouldn't need many laws to govern themselves.

Wendell Berry speaks eloquently about the agrarian lifestyle today. People who make their living from the land know the land; they value the wisdom about the land that has been handed down to them from their parents and grandparents. They rely upon their neighbors and support each other.

Less than 2% of Americans live on farms today. We are increasingly isolated from our neighbors. We have formed political tribes. We get news only from sources that reflect our views. We have lost a sense of transcendence.

We need Christ today more than ever. Christ brings us together in community. Christ brings us wisdom. Christ brings us values.

Third Move: Our Confession

Disciples get it right. Peter's confession is the only confession we make. It emphasizes that Christ is the center for us. Christ is the anointed one. He brings fatness to the land. People today might not see fatness as a good thing. A better way to say it might be to say that Christ brings blessings to the people.

When Jesus asks the disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is," their response seems to depend on which faction they are a part of. Some are partial to John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or another prophet.

Jesus asks each of us the same question, "Who do you say I am?" What is your testimony about me? What is your experience in the living God?

Jin S. Kim, a pastor in Minneapolis, writes in *Feasting on the Word* that Jesus calls us to move beyond our political and denominational factions and our theological beliefs to speak truthfully to each other about the impact that Christ has made in our lives. Our witness to Christ is the rock upon which the church is built.

I'll go first. When I was a young lawyer, I was never satisfied just with practicing law. I participated in bar activities. I wanted to help improve the profession. I represented surface and mineral owners against big oil companies. I wanted to stand up for the little guy.

My mother died 22 years ago. She was always the center of our family. She always affirmed me. She was always proud of me. I was lost. I went through a mid-life crisis. I was searching for meaning.

I started going to church again. I took all my idealism and my quest for justice and I focused it on the church.

I went to seminary and found my wife there. She also had a passion for Christ. She expressed it in mission trips to Nicaragua and serving on the staff of a church for the homeless in Oklahoma City.

I was called to be your minister 13 years ago. You called Mary to be your co-pastor nine years ago. Mary started Mother's Day Out as a ministry to the neighborhood. I used my background as a lawyer to start working on criminal-justice reform.

Christ brings meaning to my life. I feel drawn to people who have been ground up by the legal system. We talk about the Oklahoma Standard and how religious Oklahomans are, but it is not reflected in the criminal justice system. Oklahoma has very harsh criminal sentences. The attitude of legislators and prosecutors is very punitive. That apparently reflects the will of the people. They don't seem troubled by it. Oklahoma has the second highest incarceration rate in the country for men and highest for women. Is that because there are more criminals than anywhere else? Or is it because we are the most punitive people in the country?

Christ reaches out to the least of these and brings them into community. Christ is calling us to reach out to them, too.

Christ also affirms us. I was a member at First Christian Church of Edmond when I started seminary. It was a challenge to find time to practice law, go to seminary and be a single parent of a daughter in grade school. Shirley Brown was one of the elders at First Christian. Every time she saw me in Fellowship Hall, she asked how I was doing and what burdens I was carrying. She always had a genuine interest in me.

Many of you affirm me, too. I am going to single out Beth Duffy, in part because she is not here. She would be embarrassed by mentioning her in worship. Beth often marvels that I can do so much, and she encourages me to take time off for myself.

Christ forgives us. Christ recognizes that we are flawed people. We can be short-tempered. We can become self-absorbed. We can become self-important. Christ forgives us and uses us as instruments of healing and reconciliation. I believe that Christ has called me to pursue a life of non-violence. He has brought me peace. When people insult me, especially on social media, I can let it go. Instead of responding in kind, I try to ask why they feel that way. I would rather try to understand them than escalate the insults.

Conclusion

Christ can bring a divided people together. He forgives us, affirms us and gives meaning to our lives. I encourage you to reflect on the impact that Christ has had on your life. Who do you say he is? Tell us about it.

Copyright Donald F. Heath, Jr. 2020