

Year A Proper 21 Matthew 16:13-20 Peter's Confession

Everybody has a perception of who they are – we always form an identity for ourselves. Often, it is our values or what we hold most important that dictates this identity. Your identity may even vary depending on your mood. Without simply giving me your name, if I asked you, “Who are you?” what would your answer be. Parent? Son or daughter? Teacher? Friend? We even misidentify ourselves: Who are you? Failure? Nobody? Worthless? The people around us may misidentify us too because identifying who someone truly is, requires knowledge of the person.

Today Jesus asks his disciples who the people say he is but, after they answer, he asks, “Who do *you* say I am?” that’s the same thing as saying “None of those other answers is right – I am not John the Baptist. I am not Elijah. I am not Jeremiah or any other prophet. They have misidentified me. I’m looking for a different answer – the right answer.”

Simon Peter is the one who speaks up. “You are the Messiah” he says, “The Son of the living God.” That’s the right answer. That’s a hard thing to say. Peter was looking at a fellow human – a man he had hung out with for about three years – and here he was, calling this man the Son of God. It makes me wonder if I would have been able to recognize Jesus for who he truly was. Would I have been able to name a fellow human being as the Son of God?

Thankfully, I am reassured by what Jesus then tells Peter. Peter didn’t come up with this answer on his own. It was given to him by God. Paul tells us that no one can confess “Jesus is Lord” without the Holy Spirit. When I stop to think about this, I find it amazing – I have the Holy Spirit with me. You have the Holy Spirit

with you. We know this – we often hear it, and it's in our doxology...the power of God – the Holy Spirit – working in us, but when we really think about that, it's mind-blowing. We have the Holy Spirit...and so we confess “Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God” just like Peter did 2000 years ago.

But what does it mean when we say that Jesus is the Messiah? Often how we identify ourselves is based on what we do – artist, builder, farmer – or what kind of a person we are – friend, confidante, animal lover. Jesus says that when we see him, we see God and God is many things for us depending on our need. The Lord is our Shepherd, we shall not want – he is our guide, our provider. He is our Strength and our Refuge, our Rock of Salvation; Jesus brings our prayers to God and speaks on our behalf – our Mediator and Advocate; he is Counsellor, Judge, Friend. He is Emanuel – God with us. I could go on and on because we have many names for Jesus but, on their own, they don't explain what is meant by the most important name we call him – the Messiah. Just as the people identified Jesus as John the Baptist and other possibilities, they were only partially true answers, not forming the whole identity. “Every age is tempted to transform Jesus into its own image. Jesus has been described as a great teacher of wisdom, a social reformer, a champion of individual freedom and worth, a gentle nature lover, a mystic, or a streetwise revolutionary. There are grains of truth in all of these depictions, but, in each case, people have pounded a peg labeled ‘Jesus’ into a hole drilled to fit their own religious preconceptions” [or misconceptions] (*Matthew*, Thomas G. Long, 184).

The Greek word for Messiah is “Christ”. Jesus the Christ – we use it constantly. Kids think Jesus has two names – first name Jesus, last name Christ. Sometimes

we use a title so much, we stop thinking about what's behind it. We say, "Pass me a Kleenex" when it's actually a tissue. We say we're going to take Tylenol for a headache when it's really acetaminophen. We've heard "Jesus Christ" so many times we don't even think to stop and get to know what the name means.

Jesus the Christ...Jesus the Messiah. The Messiah that most Jewish people were waiting for was the great warrior king who would lead the people of Israel in battle to overthrow their Roman oppressors and put Israel back on top. When that happened it would be called the Day of the Lord. Everyone around would convert to the Jewish faith, the faithful dead would be resurrected, and everyone would live in perfect love and harmony with God and with each other. This new age of perfect peace – this Kingdom of God – would mean that every aspect of life would have to change – politics, economics, education, welfare...The Messiah wasn't just about forgiving each believer's sins. The Messiah would heal the broken world.

Jesus announced to his hometown crowd that he was the one anointed by God to heal the world, make it whole – he was going to bring the good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to all the oppressed. Jesus taught his disciples to pray for this in the words of the Lord's Prayer...Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven...He knew he was the Messiah but he wasn't the warrior king Messiah. He knew he was going to mend the world but things weren't going to go down like most Jewish people were picturing. Just like when we ask for a Kleenex and we know we're going to be handed a tissue, Jesus knew that when people heard "messiah", they thought "warrior king leading Israel into battle." Jesus did not want *that* Messiah label.

That's why he told the disciples to keep quiet about him being the Messiah – the disciples didn't yet understand how Jesus was going to be the Messiah; how he was going to bring about God's Kingdom here on Earth. The disciples knew he was the Messiah but they didn't have the whole picture of his identity – they did not yet understand the part the cross was to play. In fact, when Jesus died on the cross, the disciples thought they'd been wrong about him – Jesus couldn't be their Messiah because their Messiah wasn't supposed to die.

After his resurrection, after they had seen the empty tomb, after Jesus had appeared to them, that's when the disciples finally realized that they'd been right. He is the Messiah; he is going to redeem the world, bring God's Kingdom – but he's doing it differently than they'd expected. Perhaps he is doing it differently than what we are expecting. Jesus is redeeming the world, revealing God's Kingdom, through love; he's doing it through conquering death; he is doing it through us. Jesus' resurrection was proof to the disciples and to us that we will be resurrected on the Day of the Lord into a redeemed world where God's Kingdom will be fully revealed on earth as in heaven. And Jesus charged them, just as he charges us today, with the task of moving that along – of living the Kingdom life in the present because we know God's Kingdom will be fully realized in the future. Jesus' talk about church and giving Peter the keys to the Kingdom finally made sense to the disciples. Here we find our role in the story – those words spoken to Peter are spoken to us as well: “on [you] I will build my church...I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (vv.18, 19).

When a lot of people think of the church now, they think of the building or of the organization – there's some good thoughts and some bad thoughts that go along

with that. What Matthew meant when he wrote the word church 2000 years ago, and what we had driven home to us during the isolation of the pandemic lockdowns, is that the church means the people – the community of believers who profess Jesus as Lord and Saviour – the body of Christ here on earth, joined together in love, faith, worship, and mission – guided by the presence of the Holy Spirit. The Church is one of God’s chosen instruments through which he reveals his kingdom to the world. And that’s what we are – God’s Church...God’s chosen instrument. I am the rock...you are the rock...together we are the rock, the foundation on which the church, the body of Christ, is built. I hold the keys, you hold the keys, together we hold the keys to the kingdom of God. Rock...holder of the keys – these are who we are, our identity, because above all else, you are – with Jesus Christ, a child of God. Rock...holder of the keys...child of God.

When Jesus spoke with his disciples there were always two pieces that he put together – the hearing and the doing. Today we hear that we are made partners with Jesus in his work – it began with Peter and continues in us – whatever we bind (forbid) on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever we loose (permit) on earth will be loosed in heaven. We would be a pretty darn useless rock if nothing was ever built on us. We would be a pretty darn useless holder of the keys to the kingdom if we never opened the door for anyone. Jesus gave us a big job to do – to work with God in anticipation of the great resurrection on the last day of the old broken age that began with Jesus when he was resurrected. We are charged with transforming the present as much as we are able because we know the future. But we don’t do it alone – we are empowered by the Spirit, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. By giving to us the keys, the point Jesus is making, according to the preaching giant, Tom Long,

“is that what the church does – the decisions it makes, the grace it expresses, the stands it takes, the truths it teaches – matters to God. When the church wrestles with a controversial issue, tries to speak the gospel to the one who is alienated from God, provides hospitality to a stranger, teaches the faith to a child, or cares for those in need, it is not just ‘playing church’; it is acting out God’s future – the kingdom of heaven – in the present and, thereby, participating in the very life of God, sharing in the power of God. When the church faithfully calls itself and the world to ethical responsibility...and when the church truly proclaims God’s free forgiveness to one who has failed to live up to that responsibility...it is not just the church that acts; God acts in and through the church” (*Matthew*, Thomas G. Long, pp.186-7). This does not mean that we, the church, will never be wrong. We must constantly be on our toes, self-aware enough to recognize when we are wrong, strong enough to admit it, brave enough to change.

Jesus is many things for us but, above all, he is the Messiah – the one who heals the world; and the church is different things but, above all, it is the people of God, us – the rock on which the body is built spreading throughout the world, the holder of the keys opening the kingdom to all others; together we are one body and together we *live* the good news – God’s Kingdom will come, God’s will *will* be done, on earth as in Heaven.