

**The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 27, 2017**  
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**Matthew 16:13-20 – Who Do You Say That I Am?**

There were so many choices this week for preaching. There was a Psalm that included two frequently used and important words about God: *hesed* or steadfast love and *emmet* or faithfulness. Then there was Romans, with its call for us to be a living sacrifice and be transformed by the renewing of our minds. Those are **so** foundational. But so is the haunting question of the gospel this morning, **“Who do you say that I am?”** Earlier in this passage from Matthew, the Pharisees and Sadducees have been demanding a sign. And I’m sure this was a question on many people’s lips. Jesus was attracting attention of all kinds. Just **who was** this Jesus? That might be a question asking for a category to put Jesus in. That might be a question of where he fit on the social scale. It might even be a question of his relevance for the rest of someone’s life.

Now Jesus is addressing his disciples. He starts out easy. “Who do others say that I am?” And the possibilities seem to be in the category of prophet. Prophets were uncomfortable people. They tended to shake things up and ask those sorts of questions that make us squirm. They called people back to the covenants and to living in right relationship with God. And often they called people back to a life of justice, rather than a comfortable life or one that looked good on the outside. And then Jesus asked a question that went deeper. After all, these were his disciples, who had spent months or years closely with him. **“Who do you say that I am?”** Peter, the impulsive one, jumps right into it. He identifies Jesus as the Messiah, or Christ. Both words mean “annointed one.” Even though Christ sounds like Jesus’ last name, it is really a title. Jesus is the one they have been waiting for. And Peter gets his moment of glory, his moment to shine. “Well done, Peter.” And using a play on words since Peter is a form of the word *petros*, for rock, Jesus declares Peter, or maybe Jesus declares Peter’s declaration itself, as the rock on which the church will stand. This sounds like a point of completion. There is a question and Peter has nailed the answer. But there is a bit more going on here.

For one thing, “church” is a more modern word than this conversation. This word appears only twice in the gospels, and both times are in Matthew. The word is *ekklesia*, and it was used in the political sphere to refer to those “duly summoned.” Jesus is not talking about a building or about a denomination. *Ekklesia* is a group of people who have been summoned. It became a community summoned by Jesus and centered in Jesus, and hopefully that is still true today. And that makes my next point all that more important. **Jesus is the Messiah.** But that is not the end of the conversation. That is the beginning of a conversation that is still unfolding. One of its aspects is hinted at in the beginning of this passage. You may have thought it was just about geography. Jesus had come into the district of Caesarea Philippi. That was the Roman name for an area that had previously had a local name. Renaming is a powerful thing. It is a reminder not only of whose land this was, but also who was supposed to be in charge of the people there. In the midst of territory occupied by the Romans and under their control, Peter has declared Jesus to be the Messiah. “Messiah” was about their Jewish history and identity and beliefs, but it wasn’t just that simple. For the Romans, there could be no one in charge but them and any puppets they allowed. There is an undercurrent here of the question of allegiance. And it is **that** aspect that I find most relevant today. To call Jesus “Messiah” is not just a name, not just an identification. It is to acknowledge Jesus’ call upon us to follow and be changed. It is connected to those words of living sacrifice and transformation. Acknowledging Jesus as Messiah is a call upon our lives.

Even in the lives of these disciples, this one simple statement by Peter became more than they thought. Declaring Jesus as the Messiah seemed to be the end of a search over centuries. “Finally – we have found him!” Much like finding Waldo. The game is over. Or, going back to my childhood, it is the game of “What is My Line?” In this televised game, there was a panel of people who appeared each week to play a guessing game. I remember one was Kitty Carlisle. In each round, there was a mystery person. The panelists got to ask the person questions that could be answered by “yes” or “no.” If the mystery person said “yes” to the question, the panelist could ask another question. If not, the next panelist got a chance to ask a question. The round ended when someone

guessed the occupation of the mystery guest. The purpose was to identify someone by occupation, and then that round was done. That is what it **sounds like** here with Jesus, but it is far, far different. The disciples probably felt like the panelists. Jesus was identified. They had ideas from their tradition of what this “Messiah” title included. And Jesus does not immediately challenge that. But I invite you to see the gospel stories of Jesus’ words and deeds as a redefinition and challenge to what the disciples assumed. We all have assumptions and expectations, and sometimes they are off base. And that includes whatever identity we have assumed about Jesus over our lives. And who we learn that Jesus **is** will inform our understanding of what Jesus is calling **us** to be and do.

For me, many of the ways I see in the world around me of what it is to be Christian do not seem very related to the gospel. When I read the gospels, I hear Jesus’ call to **follow**, rather than “belong to” in some vague sort of way. Being a Christian today can sound like we are acquiring one more label or identity in our lives, rather than that Jesus is calling us to leave our other allegiances behind and be willing to be changed. Many live as though what Jesus actually did is not relevant today. Really? Jesus no longer cares about those who are poor, sick, abused, rejected? That certainly seems to have gotten Jesus’ attention in what I read. Jesus only cares about how we spend Sunday morning? There are actually relatively few stories about Jesus during worship at the temple or synagogue. There are a lot of stories of Jesus eating, talking with people he meets on the road, being constantly interrupted by people with needs, having disciples who don’t get it and have to be taught over and over again. It seems that **that** is how and where his ministry often happened.

I was struck by the question at the end of Doug’s sermon last week. “What difference does our worship make to our lives?” What Doug’s question did for me was to connect my Sunday morning with the rest of my week and ask how I am doing. It’s not only how worship affects me when I’m part of it on Sunday morning. It is whether I am changed by coming together and worshipping, and if that change looks **anything** like following Jesus. And again, which Jesus, and how do we understand Jesus’ call? The disciples would have to learn by each experience in the months ahead just what it meant for **this Jesus** to be the

Messiah. They had as much to unlearn as they had to learn. And that can be true for us as well. Is our identity as Christians, or people summoned by Jesus, deeply rooted in who Jesus was and what he did, and do we live a life that is open to the challenge of the living Jesus? Because I experience my life with that ongoing challenge. And while I do not think that is only because I am a **pastor**, being a **second career** pastor is definitely part of it. Not only has my relationship with God changed and grown through my life, there have been times when it has been challenged or my assumptions called into question. I did not decide as a 46 year old CPA that going to seminary would be a good career move. And it wasn't just that I was changed and challenged by seminary in terms of classroom learning. I was leaving so much of my identity and comfort zone behind and travelling into unknown territory. Jesus is calling – but calling me to be and do what? And I believe the church as a whole is being called to leave many familiar and assumed things behind and is being challenged to follow Jesus in the midst of times that continue to change. God remains the one of steadfast love and faithfulness. But our assumptions and expectations of what is demanded of us may be challenged. Are we ready to answer the question Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" AMEN