

Matthew 16: 13-20 Identity

Identity—seems the obvious focal point of this passage from Matthew. “Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’” This is a very familiar text. It is widely known as the Confession of Peter because of his answer to another question. But the response to this question is quite varied and somewhat anonymous. We don’t know which disciple reported which answer. It seems that within the crowds which have been following Jesus there are lots of possible answers to the question. “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” These possibilities were all men who were known by those in the region as ones who brought a word from God to the people—almost always a message of judgment for their sin; a call for them to turn back to the ways God had given them for their lives. Jesus’ activities of healing have sparked comparisons. This type of comparisons are very like the ones we make when we compare a new figure on our horizon to one known before, someone from history or previous experience. Think how often we compare some sports figure or politician to a previous giant in the same profession, someone who set the bar for excellence. These responses would have been reasonable answers, even for the disciples to have given. Our knowledge of the Hebrew prophets often doesn’t include the fact that many of them were known for the miracles they performed in God’s name, especially Elijah. We aren’t sure why this type of survey question was asked by Jesus of his disciples. At first, it seems unlikely that he was concerned with what “people”, that is, those in the crowds who gathered, were saying about him although in Mark we find that Jesus seemed not to want the truth of his identity to spread too soon and John’s gospel reports a concern about the hour that is coming. In asking this question of them he terms himself the “Son of Man”, the title he repeatedly gives himself in Matthew’s gospel. Having received the answers of the disciples to this question, he poses another one to them. And perhaps he was more interested in the answer to this next question he posed to the disciples than the first one: “But who do you say that I am?” That immediately makes the question more intense and personal. It is not repeating the conclusions of others, but the thoughts of those closest to him. In other words, he is saying: You who have left home, family, vocation and all things material behind to follow me, who do you say that I am? Or maybe he is asking, why have you taken this journey with me? Although the answers provided to the first question came from a plural, in a type of chorus--Here only Simon Peter spoke up, the others are silent, not willing to venture an opinion. In many ways that speaking out was a characteristic of this disciple. As always he was the boldest and most vocal of the disciples. “Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’” The second part of that answer was what we would term an out of the box answer. There was no figure in the tradition, no pattern for that idea to have been based on as we understand the meaning of the answer. Those who worshiped God were awaiting the coming of a Messiah, but the arrival of God’s Son was not a part of the expectation. When we state that Jesus is the Messiah, we are claiming divinity for the one we call our Lord. It is a confession of our faith. And we often see this passage as the first acknowledgment of that truth—a confession of faith by Peter. It seems that Jesus’ response is a confirmation of that view: “And Jesus answered

him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Peter son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.'" It seems that Peter here has a moment of holy insight. Jesus is, Peter states, the Messiah, God's promised and long-awaited anointed one, the one who will redeem Israel, restore her fortunes, and return her to her former glory." But what Peter says actually goes beyond that. He goes on to say that Jesus is also the Son of the Living God. The anointed one, the Messiah was expected to redeem and restore Israel, but the tradition did not claim son-ship for the Messiah. Peter's declaration did. That was an especially risky statement as the opening verse tells us they were in the district of Caesarea Philippi, a town named by Philip the Tetrarch in honor Caesar Augustus who was named Son of God. Peter's declaration isn't just a faithful one; it's incredibly audacious, even risky, as Roman Caesars typically brooked no competition to their claims. Under the conditions of domination and oppression imposed by Rome, it is not surprising that Jesus, although blessing Peter for his insight, instructs his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. This second question which Jesus asked is also the question each of us must answer; we are not called upon to take a survey about who Jesus is; we are called on to declare who we know him to be: the Messiah, anointed to redeem humanity, to restore human beings to a right relationship with the living God. A living God is a dynamic God and not a static God whose clearest communication happened in the past. Jesus is the Messiah of the living God. Jesus, as Son of Man, means that God continues to speak out and to act. God does not have to resurrect John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or any other prophet to speak. God never ceases to exist and to create and to anoint. God continues to move through history. Jesus continues the dialogue he is having with Peter: "I say to you Petros, and on this petros, I will build my ekklesia. " I inserted the Greek into this verse for a couple of reasons. This verse has been the basis of many traditions which granted the disciple Peter a dominant role in the life of Christ's followers. Traditionally this is seen as a renaming of the disciple Simon who is frequently referred to as Simon Peter. But Petros is a feminine noun which means rock. This leads to the possibility that it not the disciple himself that Jesus is saying will become the rock or foundation of the ekklesia or congregation. Perhaps it is the declaration which he has made, the revelation which he has received which will become the basis upon which the faith of the followers will hinge. Ekklesia is the Greek word for assembly or congregation, although it is usually translated as church. The ekklesia, the church will be an assembly based on Jesus' identity as the Messiah of the living God. A living God is a relevant God, a contextual God. As with John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, and other prophets, God speaks a relevant word that reflects the contexts in which we live and the challenges people face. A living God is not bound to or by the written page, even in a sacred text because the Holy Spirit moves and acts eternally. Another point from this text that has long captured our imaginations is : "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." Countless jokes have been made which feature Peter as the gatekeeper standing at the Pearly Gates. Roman Catholics see these keys as a symbol of St. Peter's authority to enforce the discipline of the Church, laying down binding rules and exempting people from them—the supreme guardian of the tradition of Jesus' teachings and was thus authorized to make rulings about such matters as divorce and Sabbath observance. However, this statement occurs at a specific point in God's history—the role of Peter as revealer of Jesus' identity is unique in scope and time. When we picture Peter holding a set of keys invested with

the authority to admit or refuse admittance to the kingdom, our minds tend to dwell on the negative part of his job description. What about that invitational function implied in Jesus' words? What about the image from Peter's life we have from Acts where Peter is the one who stands in the public square and proclaims the Easter message to those gathered at Pentecost? He has the joyful task of leading, binding many into the kingdom through his preaching. Peter has been commissioned in this text to reveal Christ to others and to invite into the kingdom those previously excluded—like the Gentiles—like us. The lectionary passage from Exodus 1 begins with verse 8: "Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." This not knowing who Joseph was led to the enslavement of the people in Egypt. Today, we need to focus on the answer to Jesus' second question to his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?"

When we know and proclaim who Jesus is—The Messiah, the Son of the Living God—our worth and our identity is no longer dependent upon who is king in Egypt—who occupies the halls of ever changing power in this world. Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth. Unfortunately, many who loudly proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, still want to trade in the currency of the earthly king, no matter that that king, that system is ruthlessly oppressing and dealing in the currency of hatred. But Jesus doesn't trade in that currency. Jesus' currency is not the currency of hate, not the currency of oppression, not the currency which dehumanizes, not the currency of violence, not the currency of fear. His power comes from sacrificial love and he doesn't replace people, he continually adds to the body he calls his own. When we are called to answer Jesus' question, if our answer is you are the Messiah, the living Son of God, we need to also remember what that means for how we are called to live in this world revealing our answer to a world which does not seem to know Jesus.

In the name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.