

Who Do You Say that I Am?

Matthew 16: 13-20

We continue in the Gospel of Matthew this week. In our reading today we come upon a critical event in the ministry of Jesus and his disciples. No, our story is not about a particular healing. Nor is it our favorite Jesus teaching moments, you know when he turns to thousands and thousands of people and speaks words of wisdom, words that have stood the test of time. No, the event I'm talking about is something we almost always overlook. We take for granted its simplicity. We underestimate its power. We ignore its very impact on our faith. This critical event in Jesus' ministry which I'm talking about, that we read about today in our text is a confession of faith, a confession said by one his disciples. This simple yet powerful confession of faith shapes the disciples, shapes our understanding as modern day disciples, this confession of faith which Peter gives, shapes our understanding of just exactly who Jesus is for us and how his ministry some two thousand years later still impacts our lives as his followers.

Now before I go any farther in this sermon, I need to name the elephant in the room. As Disciples of Christ, we usually cringe at formal statements of belief. Because you see, we understand them to be too much like the creeds other churches have people recite. Unlike other churches who recite the Apostles Creed

or the Nicene Creed as part of their worship service, we don't hold to such practice. In fact, one of the things we say is, "No Creed But Christ", meaning that a "confession of Jesus as Christ is sufficient for fellowship in the church. That's all that we require. [That's why when someone wants to join our churches, all we ask them, "Do you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God?"] No other test of fellowship is necessary. We don't require class upon class to become a member. They are not asked to recite formal statements of belief such as creeds for them to become members. If a person has experienced the power of Jesus Christ in his or her life, and through this experience proclaims Jesus as the Son of the Living God, then that's good enough for us. Now I will say in good Disciple fashion, the interpretation of such a statement is up for debate but that's another sermon for another time.

My point in naming our allergic reaction to formal belief statements as Disciples is that before we start ignoring Peter's words or treat them as something that remotely looks like the beginning of a creed, I want to push us a bit. I want us to take another look at it. Because by doing so, we will discover that Peter's words speak to something more concrete for us as people of faith.

They speak to the very identity of Jesus, an identity which continues to shape our understanding of his ministry here on earth as his followers. How we

identify Jesus impacts the way we interact with others. It impacts how we live in relationship with the Earth. It impacts how we live in relationship with our God.

For example, if we read the Bible, engage in conversations of faith and all we come away with is an understanding that Jesus is just some nice guy who had a few interesting things to say, then we won't have any buy in for the larger faith picture. We won't be compelled to work for justice. We won't see everyone as created in the image of God. We won't trust that God is in the process, working to bring about God's Kingdom of hope and peace here on earth. Nothing about our very being will have been transformed.

But...but...if Jesus is more than just some nice guy, more than someone who shared insightful things over two thousand years ago, if we have as our faith foundation this confession which proclaims Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, everything changes. How we see and treat others changes. Our understanding of Jesus' ministry here on earth changes because now...now he is God's gift to us, working for us, working with us. We see Jesus' life and ministry as one reconciling God's people to God once more. Now, Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

This simple yet powerful confession of faith changes everything for us. It changes our understanding of who we are as the people of God. It changes our call

as the Body of Christ here on Earth. It even changes how we read and interpret this well known story.

And here's why I say this: All the Gospels writers include this significant question in their writings, the question which Jesus asks his disciples, the question of "Who do you say that I am?" However, only Matthew includes verses 17-19, the part where Jesus turns to Peter and says that he didn't get this answer from others but rather he got this answer from God in heaven. Only Matthew includes this part where Jesus changes Simon's name to Peter, meaning rock. Only Matthew includes verses 17-19 and it is this part that I want us to focus on today.

We've all heard sermons, and yes, I probably have preached sermons that share how Jesus tells Peter is the rock upon which he will build his church. Well, I'm here to say, I owe everyone an apology. I have lead you astray. My only excuse is that everyone was doing it. Everyone assumed we knew what was right. We assumed that Matthew is talking about Peter being the rock upon which Jesus will build his church.

I have to tell you, I don't know what was different about this reading. Maybe I'm just at a different place in my life or maybe I am finally paying attention to God's Spirit at work in this world, but I noticed something that I had always overlooked in reading this passage. Grammatically the two rocks don't add up. It is

not possible. Because you see, Petros (Peter's name) is masculine. Petra, the rock that Jesus talks about is feminine. Grammatically, Petra agrees with the Greek word, ekklesia or church which Matthew uses in verse 18.

Many commentators think that Jesus wasn't talking about Peter per se but rather, Peter's confession, being the rock upon which Jesus will build his church. That this statement proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, this statement is what Jesus is telling his disciples, is telling us as his followers to hold to as our theological foundation, to lift up as the lens through which we work in and engage this world.

So if we continue this line of thinking, this means when Jesus is talking about his church, he is not referring to a particular building or global institution but rather a community. Jesus is saying that he will lift up a community of believers who have experienced the living God in their lives, a community whose very lives have transformed by the love and grace of God, a community who reflects the justice and peace of God's Kingdom here on earth. Jesus will lift up a community of believers who proclaim that he is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God and it will be this community who will work to bring about the Kingdom of God here on Earth.

I'll let that sink in for a moment. I've had all week to come to terms with this new revelation. I know for most of us, this is the first time we have heard this. I'll give it time to sink in...because basically this revelation changes how we live out our calling. As his followers, as disciples of Christ, Jesus isn't asking us to build large structures, structures which become so insular we cannot connect to the world around us, structures which become so self centered that we cannot see the brokenness and hurt that resides just outside our walls. Jesus isn't asking us to only focus on ourselves. Rather, instead, he wants us to realize that he is calling us to come together in community, a community that proclaims Jesus is more than just some nice guy with some interesting teachings. He is the Son of the Living God, a God who is still relevant, a God who is still bringing healing and wholeness, a God who is still challenging us to become the community of WELCOME God calls us to be. Jesus is calling us to be the Body of Christ here in this world, working for justice, working for peace, working for love, not because this work will add to our budgets or bring more people in to our doors. We are called to this grace filled work because our lives have been transformed by the light and love of Jesus Christ and we will never be the same again.

Or let me say it this way...It is no secret that the mainline churches are declining, that many of our churches are in fact dying. Denomination after

denomination are trying to figure out how to reverse this trend. I cannot say that this fact does not scare me because after all, this is my livelihood. It is my calling.

But I cannot help but wonder if maybe this process in which the mainline church are going through, if maybe instead of dying, we are going through a process of redefining. We are beginning to answer the very real question, address the very theological foundation for us which Jesus poses to his disciples in our text today, and which he poses to us time and time again... "Who do you say that I Am?"

Maybe as communities of faith we are rediscovering the answer to this question and are beginning to live it out through our word and our actions because...truth be told, I experienced it just this past week. From funerals to conversations, from people stepping out of their comfort zones to sing at gatherings to people naming the heroin epidemic in our community and wanting to help heal the brokenness found right here in our midst, I am discovering that God is indeed at work in this world, working through a community of believers who continue to experience the living God in our lives, working through a community whose very lives have transformed by the love and grace of God, working through a community who is not ashamed to say...that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, a community who is letting this be the rock upon which we live out our calling as followers of Jesus Christ as we work to bring healing and wholeness to all of God's children. And if you want to join this community...all we ask is

Who do you say Jesus for you? May our search and the living out of the answer to this question continue to challenge us to become the people of Welcome God created and calls us to be. Amen.