

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 16, Series A (Pentecost 12)
Saturday, August 26th, 2017
Sunday, August 27th, 2017

Sermon: “You Are the Christ!”

Text: Matthew 16:13-20

Focus: Jesus Christ is the Son of God!

Function: That they would believe in the divinity of Christ.

Structure: Story-Interrupted

Locus: “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father before eternity, and true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord...” (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles’ Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen. “Who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15, ESV).¹ That is the question Jesus asked his disciples in our Gospel lesson today. “Who do you say that I am?” is also the question that Jesus is asking you today. It is the most important question you will ever consider, for your answer is a matter of eternal consequence.

Throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry, his identity was always a matter of question. Despite the affirmative declaration God boomed from the heavens at Jesus’ Baptism—“This is My beloved Son...” (Matt. 3:17)—many people, including Jesus’ disciples, were slow on the uptake. They were slow to believe the wonderful truth that Jesus is both

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

Israel's Messiah and the divine Son of God, both true God and true man. After Jesus began his healing ministry and calmed the stormy sea, his disciples marveled and asked, "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?" (Matt. 8:27).

When Jesus preached in hometown Nazareth, he offended his neighbors and relatives, who asked defiantly, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? Are not his brothers... [and] all his sisters with us?" (Matt. 13:54-56). And they were offended by him, refusing to believe that he could be their Messiah.

After King Herod executed Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, he heard about Jesus' fame and miracles and surmised that, perhaps, Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead (Matt. 14:1-2). And Jesus notoriously befuddled and confounded his enemies, who repeatedly tested his authority and asked him straight up, "Who are you?!" (John 8:25), and "If you are the Christ, tell us" (Luke 22:67). But Jesus would not tell them because they weren't listening.

And so it was that Jesus came to Caesarea Philippi with his disciples. It was an important city north of the Sea of the Galilee with a long, pagan religious history. And so against the backdrop of pagan shrines, Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matt. 16:13). Son of Man was one of Jesus’ favorite titles to call himself. And in short order his disciples, well aware of the buzz, gave him a survey of the popular responses.

Some, like King Herod, thought Jesus might be John the Baptist back from the grave. Others thought he might be the prophet Elijah, who was promised to return before the End of Days (cf. Mal. 4:5). Yet Jesus, of course, had already told his disciples that John himself was the fulfillment of that prophecy (John 11:13-14). Still others suggested that maybe Jesus was Jeremiah or one of the other Old Testament prophets.

Then Jesus turned to them and made it personal. “But what about *you*? Who do *you* guys say that I am?”

And Simon Peter, never one to miss a beat, answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of God” (Matt. 16:16). It was a big, bold, beautiful confession of faith. We are used to Peter’s impulsiveness, which often

gets him into trouble in the Gospel narratives. But not this time! This time Peter got it right because, after all, even a blind squirrel finds a nut now and then.

Peter calls Jesus both the Christ and the Son of the living God. In other words, Peter confesses the wonderful truths captured in the Church's Creeds, that Jesus is both God and man, with both human and divine natures. And, ultimately, that is what makes him our Savior and Lord. Peter bypassed all the pagan gods around him and all the popular interpretations of Jesus' identity and went straight for the truth. "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matt. 16:16).

Just as people had lots of different ideas about Jesus in the first century, so also now in the twenty-first century all kinds of ideas abound. Some people say that Jesus is a great teacher like Buddha. Others say that he is like one of the great prophets like Moses. For example, Islam views Jesus as a great prophet, although not as great as Muhammad. Others regard him as a misguided Jewish rabbi who rose above his rank and fell hard. Yet others see him as their personal coach

or their buddy. Several years ago, the controversial pop singer Madonna was spotted wearing a T-shirt that said JESUS IS MY HOMEBOY.

Yet none of those conceptions of Jesus will do. They are all misrepresentations of Jesus. None of them goes far enough. This reminds me of the famous trilemma of C.S. Lewis in his book, *Mere Christianity*:

“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things that Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with a man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God. But let us not come with any of that patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. Nor did he intend to.”²

This argument has been called Lewis’s Trilemma. Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. Either he was who he said he was, in which case, he is the living Lord. Or else he was either a liar or a lunatic. You can’t have him any other way. Liar, lunatic, or Lord—those are your only three options when it comes to Jesus.

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1943), 55-56.

And Peter knew that Jesus is Lord. “You are the Christ,” he said, “the Son of the living God.”

Yet it was not Peter who found out this wonderful truth. *God* told him. The Holy Spirit gave him faith to believe. And so Jesus blessed Peter and praised God:

“You are blessed, Simon, Son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal [this] to you, but rather my Father who is in heaven. And I myself now say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail [against] her. I will give to you the keys of the reign of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in the heavens, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in the heavens” (Matt. 16:17-19, CSM).

Wow! These are tremendous words, and Jesus certainly packs a lot into those three verses.

First Jesus calls Peter blessed. He is blessed, not because he is so smart or wise or discerning. He is blessed because our heavenly Father revealed the wonderful Word about Jesus to Peter (and to all who believe in his name).

Fallen, sinful human beings like Peter and like us cannot come to Christ on our own (John 6:44, 65). Rather, he must come to us. We do

not choose him; he chooses us (John 15:16). Jesus affirms this earlier in Matthew's Gospel when he says, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will" (Matt. 11:25-26).

Many wise teachers in Jesus' day could not figure out who he was. Even many famous Bible scholars today can parse every Greek and Hebrew word in the Bible, but they do not have enough humility or faith to believe in Jesus as Lord. Truly, what a tremendous blessing it is to receive saving faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God!

Jesus continues and gives Simon a new name: Peter, which means a rock. (It's almost as if Peter's nickname was Rocky!) And Jesus says that on the rock of Peter's confession he will build his Church. (Notice, by the way, that Jesus calls it *his* Church—not Peter's Church, not the pastors' Church, not even the people's Church. Similarly, Epiphany congregation is not my church or your church. It is Jesus' church. The Church of God has always been and always *will be* only Jesus' Church.

Yet we are blessed to be a part of it by baptism and faith in the promises of Jesus).

The Church of Jesus Christ is built on the rock of Peter's confession, on the firm foundation of the prophets and apostles with Christ himself as the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20). The foundation of the Church was built on Peter's faith in Christ. And the stones were laid in the blood of Jesus poured out on the cross. We can be "living stones" (1 Pet. 2:5) in that Church if we believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God. The Church is a mighty fortress for the people of God. Not even the Gates of Hell can prevail against it!

So what do you say? Against the pagan backdrop of post-modern America, I ask you: Who do you say Jesus is? Who do you believe him to be? Is he the Christ, the Son of the living God? Is he your crucified and risen Lord, who died for you and your salvation and rose again to give you eternal life? Or is he merely a teacher, a prophet, a guru or a guide? Only our Father in heaven can reveal the truth to you. Who is Jesus to you? Before you answer, I beg you to study the Scriptures, read the words of Jesus, and pray for Lord to show you the way. It's the most

important question you will ever answer. In the name of the Father and
of the Son and of T the Holy Spirit. Amen.