

Proclaiming Jesus as Lord  
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wm. D. Peterson  
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church  
August 21, 2011

The Text: Matthew 16:13-20

New Living Translation (NLT)

**Peter's Declaration about Jesus**

13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"[a]

14 "Well," they replied, "some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say Jeremiah or one of the other prophets."

15 Then he asked them, "But who do you say I am?"

16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah,[b] the Son of the living God."

17 Jesus replied, "You are blessed, Simon son of John,[c] because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being. 18 Now I say to you that you are Peter (which means 'rock'),[d] and upon this rock I will build my church, and all the powers of hell [e] will not conquer it. 19 And I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Whatever you forbid [f] on earth will be forbidden in heaven, and whatever you permit [g] on earth will be permitted in heaven."

20 Then he sternly warned the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

**Footnotes:**

a. Matthew 16:13 "Son of Man" is a title Jesus used for himself.

b. Matthew 16:16 Or *the Christ. Messiah* (a Hebrew term) and *Christ* (a Greek term) both mean "the anointed one."

c. Matthew 16:17 Greek *Simon bar-Jonah*; see John 1:42; 21:15-17.

d. Matthew 16:18 Greek *that you are Peter*.

e. Matthew 16:18 Greek *and the gates of Hades*.

f. Matthew 16:19 Or *bind*, or *lock*.

g. Matthew 16:19 Or *loose*, or *open*.

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The Sermon

A true story: Several years ago a woman walked out of her church after a particularly wonderful Sunday service and bumped into a thin, sort of lost-looking man who was standing on the sidewalk looking up at the cross on top of the church steeple.

She excused herself and started to walk away, but the man called her back. "Tell me," he said, pointing through the front doors into the church she had belonged to most of her life, "what is it that you believe in there?"

She started to answer him and then realized that she did not know the answer, or did not know how to put it into words, and as she stood there trying to compose something, the man said, "Never mind. I'm sorry if I bothered you," and walked away<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Story source: Barbara Brown Taylor. *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004

Well, he did bother her, because here she was, a long-time member of this particular congregation, someone who professed herself to be a “good Christian,” and she couldn’t come up with an answer to a simple question about what her church believed when unexpectedly put on the spot. There was nothing hostile about the man’s question, but it had stumped her, and she wanted to make certain that if she ever got a similar opportunity, she would be ready.

By contrast to this individual’s confusion, consider the answer of an Amish man when he was asked about the state of his salvation. An enthusiastic young evangelist approached him and asked whether he had been saved, and whether he had accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior?

The gentleman replied, “Why do you ask me such a thing? I could tell you anything. Here are the names of my banker, my grocer, and my farm hands. Ask them if I’ve been saved.”

So, what is our most basic – our most core – belief as Christians who live and move and have our being in the faith within the context of a Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Congregation?

We believe what Peter believed and professed, That Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!<sup>2</sup>

Profession of that belief is the basis for our faith as Presbyterian Christians, and profession that Jesus Christ is your Lord and Savior, is the only requirements for membership in this church. We can disagree on many other things, but this conviction about Jesus as the Christ is bedrock.

At the same time, if you have been chosen for the ordained office of Deacon or Elder, or seek ordination as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament, then there are additional questions to be answered. You hear these additional questions each time we have an installation and/or ordination service here, or at a Presbytery meeting.

We believe another thing that is highlighted in this text from Matthew.

Remember how Jesus tells Peter that the answer to Jesus’ “Who am I?” question wasn’t his own? Eugene Peterson puts Jesus’ words this way:

God bless you Simon, son of Jonah! You didn’t get that answer out of books or from teachers. My Father in heaven, God himself, let you in on this secret of who I really am.

So that’s what we believe. We are convinced we – if left to our own reasoning capacities -- aren’t sufficiently smart to correctly figure out who Jesus is and what salvation means. Rather we believe that it is God’s Spirit which gives us the capacity

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<sup>2</sup> *Messiah* being the Hebrew for *anointed one*. – In Greek *cristos*, which is usually translated into *Christ*, also means “the anointed one.”

to understand and confess what we need to understand and confess.

That is why in most Presbyterian churches you won't experience altar calls, and most Presbyterian ministers won't press you to tell when you came to Jesus. We are more inclined to believe that Jesus comes to you, although it takes some of us quite a while to wake up to His presence.

I began this message with the story of a man on a sidewalk wanting to know what a particular church believed. The reality, is that in today's Gospel lesson, Jesus himself is the man on the side-walk, the one who asks his disciples what they believe in here – in their hearts and minds – in the inner core of their being.

There's a pattern we see in the gospels where Jesus goes about his ministry of teaching, and healing, and hanging out with people in a manner that tends to offend the religious leaders of the day, and then pulling his disciples aside and asking them what they are learning. Those intimate times alone with their Master must have been both exhilarating and terrifying for the disciples. Exhilarating to get time alone. Terrifying because they knew they'd be quizzed about how well they have understood him and, in good Jewish fashion, Jesus does not hide his displeasure at their consistently low scores.

Any teacher – any preacher – any parent, can identify with Jesus as he bangs his head against whatever he had handy to bang it against as he realized once again just how dense his disciples were.

But this time Jesus starts with a "soft" question, an easy question, "Who do people say that I am." Even the hands of the slowest disciples likely shot up because they could get this answer right. After all, there is little risk in repeating what you've heard. The risk comes in answering Jesus' followup question, "Who do you say that I am?" What is it that you believe in there?

I have an image that at this point the tenor of the interaction changed dramatically. There was probably a lot of throat-clearing. Maybe there was some of the disciples look away, and others find the backs of their hands suddenly fascinating, while others move little piles of dirt around with the toes of their sandals. Don't you anticipate that there were some awkward moments here as they prayed that someone, anyone, would break the uncomfortable silence.

And, of course, good old Peter did. And he got the answer right this time, although without scolding him Jesus lets Peter know that he only got the answer right because God the Father slipped in a crib sheet and told him what to say.

But that's a good thing – getting the correct answer from God, that is – because it finally demonstrated to Jesus that their relationship with him was giving them the desired pipeline to the Spirit of God. In other words the process of spending time with Jesus, day after day, was also giving the disciples the right content for their belief.

Further, because Peter once again risked a response, Jesus calls him petros a masculine term for a stone, and declares that on this very petra a feminine term for a large boulder or mountain, Jesus would build his church. At least that is what

Matthew says Jesus said, but Matthew wrote in Greek and Jesus would have spoken in Aramaic, so Jesus probably called Simon “kephas” from which we get the anglicized Cephas as another designation for Peter. Confused yet?

We don't need or want to get hung up on semantics. We don't want to get into the Catholic versus Reformation arguments about whether or not Jesus meant for Peter to be the model for the first pope, in which there was to be a long line of succession continuing to this day.

What we want to say is, “Thank goodness for Peter!” Right or wrong, he is always depicted as the first one out of the gate, the first one to leave his fish nets and follow Jesus, the first one out of the boat to walk on the water, the first to volunteer his opinion on any given subject. Sometimes it is hard to say whether he is courageous or just plain reckless, but in this instance Jesus heaps incredible praise on him and gives him remarkable authority in building a lasting foundation for the ministry of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

As Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest puts it:

It is nothing that [Peter] is or says or does all by himself that wins him the keys to the kingdom. He is blessed because his answer is God's answer, and he is a rock because he is a chunk off the Rock of Ages, and it is on this relationship that the church is built, not on any virtue of Peter's – or yours, or mine. Peter is chosen, not because the right answer has occurred to him. On the contrary, the right answer has occurred to him because he is chosen, because Jesus in his unsearchable wisdom, his inscrutable way, decided to pick a bullheaded, bighearted, fallible, stubborn, never-say-die rock upon which to build his church.

We still desperately need the Peters for the church to continue. And we need those of us who are clearly the “not-Peters,” who don't know what we believe until we can contrast it to what the Peters say they believe. We need those who help pull the Peters back in the boat when they've taken their eyes off Jesus and have begun to sink.

Peter may not exhibit the flawless character, the intellectual acuity, the spiritual depth I would like in the founder of my church, but without folks such as Peter we probably wouldn't have any church.

Further, isn't it wonderful to know that the rock on which our church was built, Peter, was and is one of us? Isn't it freeing to know that the rock who is the cornerstone needs to be scolded periodically because he is fully capable of being a stumbling block?

So, the next time someone asks you what you believe, or what we believe in here, and you know the answer matters very much, go ahead and give an answer. Take a stab at it. Give it a try.

You may say something stupid, but then again you may surprise yourself and say something inspiring instead. The most important thing is to try.

So try – with your words – and with your life, to live this faith unto which we are called.

Thanks be to God!