

Matthew 16:13-20: Who Do You Say I Am?

Sermon for MBCCC by Dr. Katelyn Brackney

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¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah,^[a] the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter,^[b] and on this rock^[c] I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹ 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.” ²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was^[d] the Messiah.^[e]

This question of “who do people say the Son of Man is?” seems to have been a hot topic in Jesus’s day. The disciples, when asked who people say “the son of Man” is, quickly rattle off a few options: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, other prophets...” All of whom were well known and respected, some recent, some from far in the past, but either way there didn’t seem to be a consensus as to which one. People simply identified Jesus, the Son of Man, with these (now) dead prophets who were sent by God to deliver good news, hope, or opposition, to stand up against the powers that be, among other acts of justice and good deeds – all in the name of God.

And after sharing this list of possibilities I can imagine Jesus taking it in, maybe nodding a bit and making a “hmm okay” face. And then he gets more specific and says, okay, “who do YOU say I am?” I imagine there was a bit of silence, maybe some awkward glancing around between the disciples as they tried to decide how to answer, or who would answer. Then, finally, Peter speaks up and says “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

Simon Peter, one of the “feature” disciples has, for the second time, proclaimed Jesus’s identity. You may recall from a few weeks ago when Peter stepped out in faith to walk on water with Jesus, only to get overwhelmed and begin to sink. When Jesus reached out and saved him, Peter proclaimed that Jesus was the son of God. Here, Peter again declares that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior, the son of the Living God.

After Peter steps up and says who Jesus is, Jesus responds saying, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven.” Yay Peter! He got it right! But when I think on that response a moment longer I feel...less celebratory and more...maybe, annoyed? Whenever statements like this are made there’s something that doesn’t sit quite right with me. What do you mean flesh and blood didn’t reveal this to you? Didn’t the experiences Peter has had with Jesus these last weeks and months mean anything? Didn’t they teach Peter more about who Jesus is, and thus who God is? Don’t they matter? Don’t our flesh and blood experiences matter? Well, the answer is yes, they do.

One commentary I read stated,

Peter’s answer points in the direction of a greater truth: as Son of the living God, this Messiah is also the one who is “God with us” (Matthew 1:23). That truth is significant because it means (among other things) that everything the disciples have experienced with Jesus, everything they have learned from this Messiah through their limited senses of sight, sound, taste, and touch, is not simply knowledge or experience revealed through “flesh and blood.” It is, in fact, a revelation from God. ([Working Preacher - Audrey West](#))

When I read that perspective I sighed with a bit of relief. There have been times I’ve heard this text preached or explained as us needing God to reveal God’s self to us, not through our own experiences, but through some form of divine

revelation. But this suggests that those experiences, those embodied moments, are part of the revealing of God; they are not mutually exclusive. That same author I quoted a moment ago said, “Whatever Jesus reveals is what God reveals. Whatever God reveals is what Jesus reveals. Peter and the disciples receive God’s revelation through their experiences of this Messiah.”

Their flesh and blood experiences matter, it’s just that they were more than *just* flesh and blood. Their experiences of Jesus, of God, were full of real moments with God and others. And the same is true for us. But before I jump into more on those real moments, I want to hang out here for a moment longer.

The title Jesus said for himself, “Son of Man,” and the title Peter said “Son of the Living God” are both significant. These titles tie Jesus’s identity to both his humanity and divinity, both matter, and both are fully on display here.

A quick fun fact for you...The title “Son of God” appears 42 times in the Bible and “Son of Man or Mortals” appears 87 times, which tells me that his identity as human plays a big part in who he is. Especially since Son of Man or Mortals is the title Jesus most often used for himself. But no matter which title you are looking at, they both lead to something important, which is that God is active, and the activity of God, of Jesus, shows us or reveals to us, more of who God is.

And over these last several weeks, and throughout the book of Matthew and the other gospels, we see examples of the life of Jesus, the activity of our *living* God. Jesus is *with* people, feeding people, listening to people, spending time with the folks others would ignore or cast aside, he is welcoming the stranger, offering hospitality, extending true peace...the list could go on. This is who God is. And this is who Peter is proclaiming Jesus to be.

After telling Peter that he is correct, Jesus goes on to say, “...I tell you, you are Peter,^[d] and on this rock^[e] I will build my church...” And there is debate about whether the “rock” the church is being built on is Peter himself or the revelation

of who God is, and while I tend to think it is the latter, even if it is Peter, it could be that in that place and time, because he knew who Jesus is, he would be pivotal to that church community – especially since that would have been the first time “church” is mentioned in the New Testament.

So if it is the revelation of God’s identity and activity that is the foundation of the church, then it is also vital that what is true about God must also be true about us. We are called, as followers of Christ, to embody who we say Jesus is – the Messiah, the son of the Living God. The God who is with us, who is not dead like the other prophets some said he was, but alive and revealing more of who God is to us, even today, in our lived experiences. And we get to be a part of that revealing work, too. And I wonder, if Jesus’s note at the end of this passage to not share his identity with others was so the disciples would need to embody it, live it out, not just talk about it, in order to share this good news.

Now, I know imagining what joining that revealing work might look like can sometimes be a challenge. So as I wrap up I want to offer some ways we might see and know the work of Christ in the world, what might be some experiences of Jesus we can share with our lives as an embodiment of Peter’s confession of who Jesus is...

And one way that might be of help, is by looking at another text for next week that is listed in the lectionary, which is a weekly list of scriptures that help us read through the Bible each year. (I’m skipping ahead a bit as I’m not preaching next week) The other text is from Romans 12:9-21, and in that passage it shares, as its title states, “Marks of a True Christian.” Here is what it says,

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly;^[a] do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Perhaps, one of the ways we can understand more of who God is, and one of the ways we, as the church, can be partners with God in that revealing work is to be people who love genuinely, hold onto what is good, serve others well, rejoice in hope, practice patience, pray even when its hard- trusting that God hears, contribute to the needs of others, extend true hospitality, be present with those who rejoice *and* those who weep, do all you can to be people of peace...these are flesh and blood ways to experience and share who God is. Flesh and blood, embodied ways, God reveals more of who God is to us. What a gift to have and share these moments that help us know God more fully.

Amen