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~ Matthew 16:13-20 ~

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

Grace, mercy and peace to you in the name of the one who calls, gathers and sends us into the world. Amen.

I am Deacon Michelle Collins, and I serve as the Assistant to the Bishop in the MNO Synod. Once again, I want to extend my thanks to all those who have participated in this year’s Summer Sermon series, as well as to the congregations and communities who have taken the opportunity listen to and learn from a variety of voices across the church this summer.

In our gospel reading today, the temperature is rising around Jesus as he begins making his way towards Jerusalem. Stories are being told about who he is and what he can do, which are leading to assumptions and judgments about his authority—what right he has to do the things he’s been doing. Our text tells us that the setting

for this passage is Caesaria Philippi, a city where the authority of the Roman Empire was strong. And what is it that Jesus has been doing? He's been feeding crowds. He's been walking on water and approaching people in their fear and confusion. He's been healing the sick without hesitation and without consideration of common social norms. In a word, Jesus has been stirring things up, and people are starting to notice.

And so Jesus takes a minute to check in with his disciples to get a sense of their experience of him. He asks them a question that seems fairly mundane on the surface: who do people say that I am. Is he checking on his reputation? Is he trying to gauge the level of threat from those who are resistant to his message? Why does Jesus ask this question?

Well, let's go back a minute. A few weeks ago we heard the story of Jesus approaching the disciples when they were on the boat. They think they're seeing a ghost, and Jesus says, "It is I, do not be afraid." Peter responds by saying that if he is who he says he is, he should prove it by inviting Peter out of the boat onto the water. Jesus invites Peter, and Peter responds...and then gets overwhelmed by the reality of the waves and sinks. But Jesus reaches down and lifts him out of the water, and those who are on the boat make a declaration of belief about Jesus being the Son of God.

So now why is Jesus asking about who others say he is? Haven't the disciples had enough proof? Haven't they made their declaration? Why does he keep asking?

Well, I think it's because Peter and the other disciples continue to need the question. Jesus asks them to articulate who they say he is not because Jesus needs to be reminded, but because they need to remember. He's not Elijah. He's not Moses or one of the other prophets. He is the Messiah, Son of the living God. How they answer this question will inform how they respond to resistance and division. How they answer this question—not just this time, but every time it is asked—will shape who they are as a community.

Can you think of a time when you have been asked to articulate who you think Jesus is? In the church, perhaps it feels like a question we shouldn't have to answer. We should already know, and others should too. But the reality is that it's a question we are faced with each and every day as we navigate the various voices in our context that compete for our loyalty and allegiance. And it is a question we each have to answer for ourselves more than one time, as our experiences of life inform our understanding of our faith, and vice versa. Neither our tradition, our

congregations, our parents, nor our heritage can answer the question Jesus asks us: but how about you, who do YOU say that I am?

And of course, Peter, being the brash one that he is, jumps in with an answer: you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. And Jesus says, “yes. That IS who I am.” And then he tells Peter that he did not come up with that answer himself, it is a result of an ongoing relationship. His understanding of Jesus comes from a relationship with the God who not only spoke through prophets in history, but is now speaking to and through those who follow Jesus. This was one of the reminders, perhaps, that the disciples needed. Jesus is not the son of a static God, but the son of a LIVING God.

And it’s a reminder that we need today. Because we do not serve a static God who only spoke to prophets in our history. We serve a God who continues to speak to and through us, who continues to enter into our human experience with a word of hope and with a reminder of new life. We serve a God who sees the unique reality of our struggles, and who joins us in those moments of doubt and confusion. In this reading Jesus reminds us that our understanding of who he is comes out of a living and active relationship with the God who speaks a relevant word to us today. This God continues to form and build the church, the assembly that is the body of Christ in the world.

When Peter responds to Jesus, Jesus commends him and calls him “the rock.” Which, if you remember anything about Peter, is a bit ironic because Peter is often the weakest example of steady, unmovable, quiet confidence. Peter is messy, impulsive, with a flair for the dramatic. But Jesus says it is on this rock that the church will be built.

Now, a few important things to note. When Jesus says, “on this rock I will build my church,” the word for church used is the word “ekklesia,” which means “assembly.” So right away, there’s this tension—Peter is called a rock, but on the rock will be an assembly, not a structure. And while Peter is called the rock on which the assembly will be built, remember that Jesus already said that Peter’s faith emerges out of relationship with God. So Peter is the rock but is not without flaws, and the church being built is a community, not an institution, and the one doing the building is the Son of the Living God, not just another prophet.

So we don’t have a confident confession of faith that comes from an individual with a flawless spiritual record. And we don’t have the beginning of an institution that will never fail or fall. Instead, we get an invitation into a community, an *ekklesia*, of

people who are in relationship with the Father in Heaven, who are stumbling their way into a confession of faith that is not always evident from their actions.

I don't know about you, but that sounds much more like the church I'm familiar with. And that sounds more like a community I want to be part of. I'd much rather be part of a community that knows itself to be flawed than a community that perceives itself to be faultless. I'd rather be part of a community that is wrestling with the question of who Jesus is for them, in their particular moment, rather than a community that is only recycling answers from decades and generations past. I'd rather be part of a community that admits that whatever faith we are able to articulate emerges out of a relationship with God that is living and active. And if what Peter said is true—that Jesus is the Son of the Living God, and if what Jesus said is true—that on that confession will be built the assembly of God's people, then we as the church have the authority--and in fact the mandate--to face the powers and forces in our time that seek to bind people in different ways. We have the authority to work for release and renewal.

Jesus is the beloved Son of the living God, who continues to enter into relationship with those who are seeking and discerning. The invitation into that relationship becomes the foundation on which our communities are built. On this rock we become communities that are open to diversity. On this rock we become communities that advocate for justice and stand with those who are being oppressed. On this rock we become communities that share the expansive love of God with the world.

Friends, we are being asked this question today as a church—as an *ekklesia*. Who do we say that Jesus is? This is a question that we answer out of our context, based on what we hear God saying to us today. In this reading Jesus reminds us that as important as the question of his identity is, it is also important to remember that our response to that question comes from an ongoing relationship with the Living God who speaks a relevant word to us today as God continues to form and build the *ekklesia*.

If you know the story of the movie *The Lion King*, you know that Simba is faced with the question of who he thinks he is in the midst of a season of disruption and disorientation. When Simba remembers that he is the son of the rightful king, he finds the strength and courage to return to his home and face his evil uncle in a violent battle that restores him to the throne. As beloved children of the living God, knowing who we are as the *ekklesia* does not lead us into prestige and privilege.

Instead, it leads us into the margins of our world where death and hopelessness are threatening to take hold.

Wherever we are in assembly today, and whatever questions may be facing us that feel like a threat to our future, my prayer is that we remember together that we gather in *ekklesia*, beloved community. We are first of all deeply loved by the God of creation, and no external or internal threat will ever change that. And I hope that we remember that the same God who loves us gives us the faith to confidently claim what is possible when we gather to love God and serve our neighbour. God has given us the authority to continue to be built on the rock of our foundation—the living, active force of love that calls life into existence, forms creation in the divine image, and gives of itself to defeat the forces of death so that all may come to know life in its abundance. And that makes all the difference. Amen.

Source: Mitzi J. Smith, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-21/commentary-on-matthew-1613-20-4>, accessed on July 20, 2026