

Sunday, August 27, 2017
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 16
Romans 12.1-8; Matthew 16.13-20
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Jesus asks, “Who do people say that I am?” (Mt 16.13). This question isn’t just directed to the disciples. It is really directed to all who would follow Jesus. There are as many answers to Jesus’ question as there are individuals who might offer a response. Some say Jesus is a prophet, a great teacher, a moral leader, a healer. After all, the Gospel accounts of Jesus, his words and his actions, certainly support each of these qualities. And all would be right. To a point. Because of these qualities – qualities shared by various prophets of old – Jesus is assumed by some to be John the Baptist or one of the other great prophets.

Others would say, expressing their most fervent hopes, that Jesus is a liberator. A nationalistic, even militaristic, hero who will liberate Israel from Roman oppression. While not specifically stated, Matthew in his Gospel, in the imagery he chooses to describe Jesus, seeks to cast him as the new Moses. The one who will liberate the Jewish people, just as Moses did.

While each response would be correct to an extent, none of these gives a complete picture of who Jesus is. He is all of these things and more. So Jesus asks of the disciples – those who have been with him for the last three years, who have seen him up close and personal, who know him as no others possibly can – “But who do you say that I am?” (Mt 16.15).

This all important question is really a turning point in Jesus’ life and ministry. What will happen next will only make sense in light of the answer that he hopes to get from those closest to him. In light of the answer that Peter correctly gives. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Mt 16.16). Compared to the other Gospel accounts, only Matthew adds the phrase “Son of the living God,” placing the role of the Messiah within the reign of God and separating the Messiah from any nationalistic or militaristic image. This places the image of Messiah in a broader context that transcends such earthly concerns. An image that will only be borne out in time.

The passage ends with Jesus “sternly order[ing] the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah” (Mt 16.20). Because frankly, in the moment, the fact that he is Messiah does not make a whole lot of sense. Certainly not to outsiders who do not have the Spirit-given insight that Peter has. The disciples must first learn and experience what the Messiahship of Jesus means before they can tell others.

This is the context in which Jesus’ question is asked – in which it is correctly answered by Peter. As times goes on, this will be verified again and again. Just one week after this conversation, Jesus goes up a mountain with Peter, James, and John, where Jesus is transfigured. Providing irrefutable confirmation of Peter’s answer. Visual confirmation in the transfiguration itself, when Jesus appears in dazzling array. Visual confirmation in the appearance of Moses and Elijah, representing Jesus’ fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Verbal confirmation in God’s words, “This is my Son, the Beloved” (Mt 17.5).

Four chapters later – the actual timeline we do not actually know – Jesus makes his triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Where, five days later, he is crucified. And then on the third day is resurrected, as he foretold immediately after his questioning the disciples. Absolute proof that he is the Messiah. Absolute revelation of what being Messiah entails. The One who provides salvation. The One who forgives all sins. The One who brings liberation from the bonds of sin and death. The One who gives new and eternal life.

In light of these events, the response to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" would certainly be "You are the Messiah." And all that goes with it. Savior, redeemer, forgiver, liberator, life-giver.

Matthew's version of Peter's confession is distinctive in its focus on Peter's role in the Jesus Movement. The name Peter is derived from the Greek *petra*, which means rock. The name may indicate the foundation on which the Church will be built, or it may refer to the character of Peter himself. His steadfast faithfulness. Jesus goes on to discuss the implications of following his example. That following him, and the leadership of Peter, is to be based on service. To be based on the way of the Cross (Mt 16.21-26).

It is no accident that Peter is the foundation on which the Church is built. Peter, who is so often headstrong; sometimes a little thick; bumbling; impulsive; more often than not acting without fully thinking through the implications. But always with the best interest of the Church at heart, without thought of personal glory. His strengths and weaknesses reflecting those of us ordinary believers who strive to be followers of Jesus. In naming Peter as the foundation of the Church, Jesus is clearly indicating that Peter serves as a model for all who will form the Church.

As those who strive to follow Jesus, sometimes in as bumbling a way as Peter, we must continually seek to answer the question Jesus asks. "Who do you say that I am?" Of course, this side of the resurrection, we know that Jesus is the Messiah, as Peter confesses. As is revealed throughout Jesus' resurrection and through what follows in the New Testament. We know the meaning of Jesus as Messiah in a way Peter could not have known when he gave his original answer. But knowing is not all there is. More importantly, who Jesus is for us is exhibited most accurately not in how we respond intellectually or verbally, but in how we respond with our lives.

This is what Paul is getting at in today's Epistle reading. Paul is encouraging – rather, he is appealing to – the church in Rome to live on earth as a people who are transformed by their choice to follow the One who is indeed Messiah. He is appealing to them to live as a people who are transformed by their communal life as the body of Christ. He is appealing to them to live as a people who ARE the body of Christ in the world. In so doing he urges them – and us – to not be conformed to the ways of this world, but to be conformed to the ways of the One we have chosen to follow. That our values and our perspectives not be shaped by this world and this age, but that we be transformed by the Spirit that dwells within us. The Spirit of Christ that has been given to us in our baptisms to guide us in being those who are transformed by Christ, to guide us in living that out in our daily lives.

Paul uses a wonderful image for this. “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Rom 12.1). He is using the well-known image of offering sacrifices in the Temple as a means of dedicating oneself to God. Instead of sacrificing in a temple made of stone, we are to present ourselves as “living sacrifices” to God. We are to devote our hearts and minds to God. Our very lives are to be a form of worship, not carried out in the temple – in church – on the Sabbath, but that our every word and action, our living of our everyday lives, be an offering of worship in response to the One who through his Messiahship, liberates us, forgives us, heals us, gives us new life. That our very lives proclaim Christ as Messiah. That our very lives be ones that proclaim salvation and liberation, that offer forgiveness and healing, that exemplify new life.

Of course, we are individuals. While we can and do make a difference in our own living sacrifice, none of us can do it all on our own. We don’t have the time or energy. Nor do any of us have all the gifts that are needed to do the work of building the Kingdom. This is why Paul explicitly describes the body of Christ as being made up of individual members. And that we each have individual and diverse gifts that are necessary to the building up of that body. Every one of us has a part to play in forming the body of Christ. A part that reflects who Christ is for us.

That is why Jesus’ question is so important. Because our answer informs how we live into our own unique place, our own unique role, as a member of the body. As people of faith, we must continually come back to that question. We must hear Jesus ask us that question again and again, “Who do you say that I am?” Then, hearing and understanding our own answer, we rededicate ourselves as living sacrifices, proclaiming who Christ is to a hurting world so in need of the hope, the healing, the forgiveness, the liberation, the new life, that only he can offer.