

Who is Jesus?

Matthew 16:13-20

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Have you ever had to explain to someone about your faith? About who you believe Jesus is? Have you been in a place where you had to defend what you believe about Jesus? About being a Christian?

As I watch the news and see Christians and other religious minorities fleeing Syria, looking for refuge, and people being executed because of their faith, I feel a sense of real despair for our sisters and brothers in Christ. And I can't help but wonder ... and certainly hope ... would I be strong in my commitment?

If I knew I would be executed, would I be brave and courageous as those disciples in the New Testament and in the early church were?

In preparation for leading a study group with young adults this fall, and at the request of some of our young adults, I'm reading the book "God's Not Dead," written by Rice Brooks. The movie has become quite popular – about a college age young man who is asked by his atheist professor to write a statement that God is dead. It leads to this young man defending his faith.

While this study will be for our high school youth – led by Pastor Shaun, and for our young adults – led by me, on Sunday mornings, it will be available for all ages, anyone who is interested and we can do the study again at another time. The movie will be advertized and open for all of us to see together – more than once, if need be.

In our story today in Matthew we find Jesus and his disciples in the villages of Caesarea Philippi. By now, he has been out among the people, teaching, healing, feeding the crowds. People are surely talking about who he is. And Jesus is curious to know what they are saying.

So he asks his closest followers. "What are people saying about who I am?"

The answer varied.

"Some say you are John the Baptizer."

"Some are saying you must be Elijah."

"Some think you are Jeremiah – or another one of the prophets."

Now, it sounds like the people were confused, but really, there is some good news in all these speculations. They apparently believe that whoever Jesus is, he is sent from God.

Not just some pagan god either. He is not some kook who's trying to get attention. He is legitimate in his godliness and in his teachings.

They are on the right track, at least.

Then Jesus asks a question of his disciples. It is probably more important than the question about what other people think.

"Who do you say I am?" He asks.

I think, wrapped up in that little question are lots of other questions.

Like:

Why are you still with me? What is it that makes you stick with me, follow me all over the place, help and serve me and the people? Why are you here? Why have you given up so much for me? What do you really believe about me?

Pretty good questions, huh? They are questions that are important for us today, aren't they?

Why are **you** here? Why do you continue to be a part of the church and the work of the church? Why do you get up early on a Sunday morning to get here in time for worship and, hopefully, soon, for Sunday School? Why do you serve on a Team and come to meetings? Why do you give financial support for the church?

Are the answers to those questions based on who you say Jesus is?

Peter made the first profession of faith when he proclaimed his answer to Jesus' asking, "Who do you say I am?"

"You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God!"

The title Christ, of course, means the same thing as the title Messiah. It means the anointed one from God. Peter is proclaiming that Jesus is the one whom the Jews had been waiting and watching for many years – the one promised in the Old Testament Scriptures.

"You are the Christ! The Son of the living God!"

And Jesus blessed Peter and told him that the only way he could know that secret was that it came straight from God. He could not have found that answer in any books or from any teachers. It was God who opened that truth to Peter.

But up until then, Peter was known as Simon, but Jesus told him from now on you are Peter, which means rock and on you – Peter, the Rock – I will build my church. And you will have the keys to the kingdom of God. You, the Church, my followers.

What power there is in that statement. Power in the faith of the Church, of the believers. We are connected to heaven, to God's kingdom. We have God's truths to discover and God opens those doors for us to see.

So, who do you say Jesus is? At baptism, whether it be our own as an adult, or whether it is our infant or child, we make our profession of faith. We say those words of confession that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. And that we turn away from sin and evil and turn to put our trust in Jesus.

Again, when our youth are Confirmed, that is, they have been baptized as children (usually) and now they have gone through some study and instruction and they are ready to make that same profession of faith on their own.

It is no longer their parents saying those words for them. It is now their choice whether they believe or not.

I always ask the Confirmation class that I instruct to write a statement of faith – to lay out what they believe – similar to what we say in the Apostles' Creed:

What do you believe about who God is?
 What do you believe about who Jesus is?
 What do you believe about the Holy Spirit?
 The church universal? The sacraments?

I ask them to write a statement of what they believe when we first begin our classes and then I ask to write another one when we are about to finish. You may remember them reading their statements of faith to you on that wonderful Confirmation Day.

Today, I'd like to challenge you to think this week about who you believe Jesus is. Don't look at our creeds or things other people have written. I invite you to write down who Jesus is to you. Think about where you believe he came from. Think about why you think he came, and what he did. Think about what that means for you.

Because identifying who Jesus is helps us with our own identity. As the Church, we are a part of what Jesus said he was going to build on the Rock.

We are a part of that Body that Paul talks about – the Body of Christ – each different, with a variety spiritual gifts to serve with – but each one important to the others and to the Head, which is Christ Jesus.

As people who follow Jesus, we are his disciples. That means that our lives are shaped a certain way. We mold our lives after his life. We have a perspective on life and love and forgiveness and peace that is fashioned after Jesus' teachings.

As Paul said in the Romans text today: "Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering."

That is how Jesus lived. That is how we as Christ followers (as Christians) are called to live.

So, I challenge you to write this week. Who do you say Jesus is? And how does that make a difference in how you live your life? Is that why you are a part of the family of God – here at Holly Presbyterian Church?

I would love to read your statements of faith, if you choose to send them to me or bring them to me. I hope doing that will also help us to be able to verbalize clearly what we believe about Jesus to someone who might really want to know who he is.

May the Lord bless you as you consider this challenge. Amen.

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