

Matthew 16:13–20

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, 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, and on this rock 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 the Messiah.

Faithful God, how blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Sanctify us by your Word and Spirit so that we may glorify you in the company of the faithful; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Rumors and gossip. These are things that just go around and around, especially in small towns. When you live in a big city there is a certain level of anonymity. You don’t know everyone you pass on the street, honestly you might not even know your next-door neighbor. Now it’s true you may not know them in a small town either, but you probably have seen them before, you might know their name, and you might have heard a juicy piece of gossip about them. Most likely you probably have said hi to them as you walked by.

That was probably the one thing that freaked me out when I first came to Canby, the casual greetings that everyone exchanged on the street. See, in big cities you don’t normally do that, especially in the neighborhood that I worked at on Lake Street in South Minneapolis where I had to walk to some of the local businesses. You probably saw the neighborhood on TV a few months ago because my office was three blocks from the police station that got destroyed. In that neighborhood it was better to walk with purpose and not make eye contact or interact, because that could easily lead to panhandling requests or worse, although most likely not during the day.

So, when I walked down the street in Canby and somebody said hi I had to look real hard to see who they were, and of course being brand new I didn’t know most of them from Adam. Some of them maybe knew who I was, but even if they didn’t it didn’t matter because, in Canby at least, you greet people you pass on the street.

I totally expected the rumor mill to be working full steam when I came to Canby, but I didn’t think I would see it at work so quickly in person. On our first weekend in town Genevieve had to head back to the Cities on Sunday because she needed one more day of work to get a big boost in her retirement account. I didn’t feel like cooking that night since we had just moved on Saturday and I preached the next morning, so Marian, the girls and I went to Dairy Queen for supper. We came to the counter and ordered our food, then got our drinks and went around the surprisingly crowded seating area to get a table. After we sat down, I could literally hear people starting on one end of the loop and moving from table to table whispering that “There goes the new Presbyterian minister.”

Now, I’m not telling this little tale to denigrate Canby, I was really just amused by the situation rather than being offended. In fact, several folks came up to us and introduced themselves, which was very nice. I’m telling this story because in our gospel lesson today, Jesus was checking to see what the people in the area were saying about him. Unlike my situation, the word on the street wasn’t right at all!

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’” Well this is a prime example of how the rumor mill gets it wrong. If you’ve been following the gospel lessons from the lectionary, you’ll know that in the lesson for a couple of weeks ago Jesus was notified that his cousin John the Baptist was recently beheaded. I’m sure that it would be easy enough to mix Jesus and his cousin up, especially without television and a 24-hour news cycle to update folks. Jesus and John may have even looked similar, and their messages, although different, could also easily have been intermixed and confused through word of mouth.

Of course, if they thought Jesus was John the Baptist resurrected, that is a bit harder to fathom, but I suppose it’s still possible. Jesus being a reincarnation of the other two prophets, Elijah and Jeremiah, are also interesting choices.

Remember, Elijah was the prophet who was taken up into the sky by a flaming chariot. He is remembered as a fighter of idolatry and injustice. Jesus being the return of Elijah makes sense in the idea that the Jewish people were looking for someone to help them fight against the incursion of Hellenistic culture and paganism, the emperor cult, and of course the oppression of the Romans.

Jesus being the return of the spirit of Jeremiah is also an interesting thought. Jeremiah was the prophet who foretold the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Babylonians. He was the prophet who warned of the coming exile, and he is also the prophet who promised a return from exile and a new covenant that God would create with Israel. If someone were to be in the crowd listening to Jesus preach and then tell others what he or she heard, it is quite possible that some of Jesus’ sermons would sound like something Jeremiah would say.

Whatever the case, it’s obvious that the people who had heard Jesus, or heard about Jesus, didn’t quite have the correct answer. So, Jesus then asks his disciples who they think he is. Of course, it’s Peter who is the first to respond. And in his bold, blurted out response he gets the answer right, kind of. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” The words that he says are right, but his idea of what being the Messiah is, is totally wrong.

Now before I get too deeply into that thought I want to back up for a bit. The conversation that is happening in this scripture is very important, but where the conversation is happening is also very important. In fact, in this case the location of the conversation adds a whole new nuance to what is being said. If you’re not familiar with the geography of the Holy Land and the history of that area, you will totally miss it. The scripture starts by saying that Jesus took his disciples to the district of Caesarea Philippi. Once upon a time it was known as the region of Naphtali. It was an Israelite place. A God place. A Promised Land place. But even as the Soviet communists could not stand to have a town named “Saint Petersburg” (and so changed it to “Leningrad”), so to, the Romans changed names when it suited them better.

The translation in the Bible says it was “Caesarea Philippi,” but literally in the Greek it is “Caesarea of Philip.” That distinguished it from the older city of Caesarea, which was south and west of there along the Mediterranean Sea. But it also pointed to the more immediate history of the place. Around 20 B.C. Augustus had given the town and its surrounding region to King Herod. Herod built up the city, including a temple of white marble that honored the cult of the Caesar. After Herod died in 4 B.C., the region passed to King Philip, who further built up the place and renamed it “Philip’s Caesarville” so as to flatter and honor his patron, Caesar Augustus.

In other words, this was a place that oozed the fetid nature of politics as usual. It was a place that worshiped Augustus, a place filled with political patronage and a reveling in all things

worldly. The very name of the town pointed to the “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine” give-and-take of the kingdoms of this world. Translated to a twenty-first century context, this would be a place that would be crawling with highly paid lobbyists in \$1,000 suits earning \$700 an hour to shill for AARP, the National Rifle Association, major drug companies, or any number of high-octane single-interest groups that work the system for influence and manipulation.

You see, to ask “Who do you say I am?” there, in the shadow of power politics and all that goes along with it, transforms the query from an idle question of curiosity into a loaded question bristling with implications. It would have been one thing for Jesus to ask this in some quiet village in Galilee, but it’s quite another matter to ask it in Caesarville. Even today, a question that sounds perfectly natural to ask in Canby Minnesota, would sound very different if it were asked in the well of the Senate.

Jesus’ famous question is fraught with background. So, to ask it there in Caesarville only heightened the drama of it. When Peter gives his clarion confession that Jesus is the Christ, there was more than a touch of revolutionary zeal in what he said. Given where they were, that confession was like going to Washington D.C., and demanding that some states be allowed to leave the United States, only in Jesus’ time it was a serious legitimate threat. There in King Philip’s city dedicated to Augustus, Peter’s saying that Jesus is the Christ was a shot across the Roman political bow.

For his part, Jesus knew deep in his heart that political pomp and circumstance, earthly splendor and glory were neither his destiny nor his goal. His warning to the disciples in verse 30 to keep his identity a secret did not stem from some fear that they’d be arrested for sedition. Jesus simply did not want to get swept up in a political campaign in which he did not want to be a candidate for secular office.

So Peter gets the words of the answer right, but if we read into next week’s lesson a bit, we find out that Peter’s idea of what a Messiah is, and what Jesus is actually going to do, are two completely different things.

And that’s the questions for us to think about today. What does Jesus being the Messiah actually mean? And a close follow up to that question is another one; what does proclaiming ourselves as Christians really mean?

I think most of us understand that God; through Jesus’ death and resurrection has created a new covenant with us. A covenant that guarantees that we will be accepted into heaven, not because of our good deeds, but because of our faith in the grace and love of God. But at the same time, we like to put a fence around that love and grace of God, somehow deciding that this person or that person doesn’t deserve it or get it. We put limitations on God’s sovereignty, when we really have no right to do so.

At the same time however, when we claim to be followers of Christ we also claim to want to follow what Christ taught, and the synopsis of his teachings were to love the Lord with all your heart, and to love your neighbor as yourself. That second part is sometimes a lot harder to do. It’s easy to talk the talk, but much harder to walk the walk. It’s hard enough for us to love ourselves sometimes, let alone love people who look different, talk, different, and definitely think different than we do and to love them as openly as God does, yet that is what Jesus asks us to do. There are no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

Who do we think he is? Who do we think we are? I invite all of us to take a close look together at who we think Jesus is and what he represents, and then to take a hard look at what being his follower means. Then take a look at who we are. I think if we are honest, we will find we are short of where we should be, I know I am. But that’s okay. Each day gives us a new

chance to do better. Let's try and do better together; for ourselves, for our neighbors and community, and for the world. Amen