



“The Question”

Scripture – Matthew 16:13-20

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, August 23, 2020

Charles teaches English at a small college in the Midwest and he has a son who was a downhill skier. The son loved racing down a slope at breakneck speed, pushing himself to the edge of being out of control. One afternoon, he went over the edge and took a terrible fall. And as he bounced off the snow his head slammed against a rock.

The young man was rushed to the University Hospital where x-rays revealed a severe concussion. For weeks he was in a coma and the prognosis was dire. He was now up against another edge; the edge between life and death. During that time his father had several conversations with his minister, and in one of them the father said, “You coast along through life and you think you know what’s important and valuable. You believe your job is really important, and your house and your car, but when death draws near, you finally wake up and see what’s really important.”¹

Perhaps not quite as intense for most of us, but certainly in the same vein, Covid-19 has had a similar impact. Most of us were living our daily routine when an invisible grim reaper flipped everything. Suddenly, being together with others – even our own family – means putting our lives in peril. *Now*, when we think about walking out the door of our homes – to go to work, to buy groceries, to take a walk, whatever – we calculate the risk. This global pandemic prods all of us to ask ourselves: What is really important?

This same question hovers over the moment that is captured in our text from the Gospel of Matthew. First, we set the scene.

During the 33 years prior to the birth of Jesus, Herod the Great ruled all of Judea. Appointed by Caesar Augustus, Herod was a building maniac! He built an enormous port on the Mediterranean Sea, he built the imposing fortress at Masada, he enlarged the Temple Mount in Jerusalem and he carried out a massive renovation of the 2nd Temple. Seven miles outside of Jerusalem, he built a lavish palace that he named after, who else, but himself – Herodian.

Herod also built a glistening white marble temple to honor Caesar Augustus. He chose to build it at the base of Mount Hermon, which today falls in the Golan Heights. The towering structure was built near the sheer rock face and where springs bubbling up from beneath the surface still today gush cool, pristine water that forms one of the tributaries of the Jordan River.

After Herod died, his son Philip became the ruler of this territory. And being a narcissist like his father, he wanted to stamp this beautiful building with his own name, so he named it Caesarea Philippi. Side note: today, thousands of tourists every year trample over its pitiful ruins – so much for vanity.

Today's gospel reading indicates that Jesus marched his disciples to this pagan site. Why? He did it to highlight the stark choice they faced. Standing in the shadow of this awe-inspiring palace that radiated the impressive power of Caesar and Philip, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?"

They respond by rattling off what others were saying about him. "Some have confused you with that fiery cousin of yours, John the Baptist. Others equate you with the great prophets of the past; the name Elijah surfaces constantly. So does Jeremiah."

Jesus neither agrees nor disagrees with their responses. It may have put the disciples on edge, to leave them wondering how their responses were sitting with him. It was high praise to be equated with these pillars of the past. Then again, perhaps Jesus was expecting something else. After an awkward pause, Jesus breaks the silence, saying, "But I want to know what you think. Who do *you* say that I am?"

Have you ever been in a group in which someone posed a question and it was met with silence? You think you know the answer, but you are not totally confident and you fear others might snicker at your response, so you say nothing. The others in the group have similar feelings so they remain silent too.

The person who tossed out the question glances at you, but you lower your gaze, you look to the side, you look at others in the group, you look at your shoes, you look at the clouds, you look everywhere except at the person who is waiting for an answer.

Might it have been like that with the disciples? When Jesus asked what others thought, they were quick to share the word on the street. However, when he put them on the spot; when he asked who *they* thought he was, they suddenly became mute.

We can empathize. Who wants to make a blunder with Jesus? I wonder if the other eleven were confident that if they waited long enough, Peter would say something. He was always quick to speak before he thought and quick to act before he sized up a situation. "Hold back," they thought to themselves, "there's no way Peter can hold his tongue."

They were right, of course. Impetuous Peter blurted out his response. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." He nailed it! And Peter was more than simply technically correct. Remember where they are standing? Near what was then an impressive edifice of the empire built on the solid rock at the base of Mount Hermon.

The question of Jesus was not simply about *his* identity, it was about *their* allegiance. Will they give their allegiance to the Roman emperor and his surrogate, Philip, or will they give their allegiance to this wandering teacher who has no possessions and no state-sanctioned authority? To whom would you have pledged your loyalty? Are you sure?

Jesus is thrilled with Peter's answer. He says, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah...And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." A few centuries later, the Roman Catholic Church declared that this statement meant that Peter was the first Pope. He was the rock on which the church was founded. But the traditional Protestant view has been that not Peter himself, but Peter's faith was the rock on which the church was founded.

I agree with the current New Testament scholars that believe "the rock" Jesus was referring to was not Peter, but Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Son of the Living God.

In fact, if today's passage had extended just three more verses, Jesus calls Peter – not the rock on which the church is founded – but a stumbling block for misunderstanding what it means to call him the Son of God. After a heated

exchange with Peter, Jesus says it is time to head to Jerusalem. It is a long journey, but the day after they arrive, Jesus refers to himself as the cornerstone. When writing to the Ephesians, the Apostle Paul also names Jesus as the cornerstone of the church. (Ephesians 2:20)

Surely Jesus, not Peter, is the foundation of the church. And the early Christians believed this with such passion, that they became a formidable force in society.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “There was a time when the church was very powerful. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being ‘disturbers of the peace’ and ‘outside agitators.’ But they went on with the conviction that they were ‘a colony of heaven,’ and had to obey God rather than (human authority). They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be ‘astronomically intimidated.’ They brought to an end such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiator contests.”²

How might the church influence society today, if it were full of people who sought to transform the world according to the teachings of Jesus? Might we build more bridges of understanding than walls that divide? Might we treat others with the same dignity and respect with which we want to be treated? Might we turn from darkness and death to build a culture of light and life? It’s still possible if we commit ourselves to the way of Jesus. The question Jesus posed to his first disciples is the question put before every person in every generation that seeks to follow him. “Who do you say that I am?”

Do not jump to a pat answer too quickly. Instead, live each day with the question. In what you think and in the way you live, who do *you* say he is?

NOTES

1. Curtiss Fussell, “The Passion of Jesus,” in *Biblical Preaching Journal*, Winter, 1996, p.33.
2. Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted in *Common Prayer*, p. 408.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

God of All Time and All Creation,

This is the day that you have made; we rejoice and are glad in it!

Though we are scattered, we give thanks that you draw us in the Spirit’s tether and bind us together as the body of Christ.

Draw near to us this hour, and open us to your Spirit moving among us. Sustain those who are weary; encourage those who are weak; bring peace to anxious minds and hope to despairing hearts. And surprise all of us, we pray, with glimpses of your grace.

Compassionate God — We pray for people known and unknown to us who seek your healing; we pray for communities near and far, which yearn for your wholeness; we pray for this creation that is groaning for redemption. We lift before you:

Those with ailing minds or aching bodies, those ensnared by illness or addiction, those whose spirits are heavy or whose souls are restless;

Those whose days are waning; those who helplessly watch loved ones slip away; those who feel their lives are defined by loss.

Those suffering from a lack of resources or a poverty of opportunity; those living in neglected neighborhoods or communities torn by conflict; those who feel discarded or devalued.

Be present, O God, with these sisters and brothers: through the comforting embrace of community, made known even through screens and across distances; through the compassionate care of those called to tend hurting minds and bodies; through the prophetic witness of advocates and change-makers; through the generous service of strangers who reflect your love.

Help us who profess Jesus as Messiah and Lord to embody his grace in word and deed. Come among us – we pray – and open our hearts, so that we might recognize your presence, discern your will, and walk in your way. Unite us in faith and send us out – as living members of a living Christ – to be your hands and feet in this world.

We pray in the name of your Son, our Lord, and offer the words he taught us:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.