

Sermon—Proper 16A—2017  
Who is Jesus to You?  
Matthew 16:13-20

There comes a time when you have to speak for yourself. What do you personally believe? What, or perhaps I should say, who keeps you wanting to live?

These are searching questions which get right down to the foundation of why we live at all.

When we begin this journey called life, we emerge as people influenced by what others thought and did. Our physical, emotional, and spiritual identities were shaped by others—particularly our parents and later by our peers and other authority figures. These are all important influences helping us to shape who we are.

Yet each of us was made by God to be a unique individual. There is no one exactly like you.

This means that God has a special, personal relationship with each one of us because He took the time to fashion each of us as a unique individual. He gave each of us His personal attention. All of this happened before we were conscious of Him.

At some point very early in our lives, we became aware that we could think for ourselves. Sometimes it took negative forms such as children rebelling against parents. But it can also have positive expressions allowing us to think creatively and conceive innovative approaches to situations.

How does this apply to our relationships with God? All of us begin with a received faith in God. It was articulated by people we considered significant in our lives—whether it was parents, relatives, or personal friends. We are grateful for these people because without them, we would have no foundation on which to build our faith. However, we cannot live on other people's relationships with God.

We have to find our own expressions of faith which will sustain and motivate us.

Jesus knew this about His disciples. They had received an inherited faith from their Jewish heritage. They were beginning to translate this inherited faith into a personal faith when they left everything to follow Jesus. They were enthralled with Him. Jesus spoke with an authority not found among their religious leadership. He did miracles which pointed like signs to that personal authority. Jesus had walked on water causing the disciples to worship Him as the Son of God. These were overwhelming testimonies to the disciples that they could put their lifelong faith in Jesus. Yet, as they were to discover, one cannot build lifelong faith merely through witnessing miracles and hearing compelling teaching. It also requires calm reflection on the question, “Who is Jesus to ME?”

Thus today's Gospel opens with Jesus and His disciples taking another trip—a retreat if you will—for the purpose of engaging in calm reflection and study. This journey was up into the far northern part of the country where religions and cultures converged in a flowing mixture of ideas and customs. Although Judaism was practiced there, Caesarea Philippi was an area where classical pagan religion had a strong foothold. There was a concentration of temples, each dedicated to a Syrian, Greek, or Roman god. It was believed that the Greek god Pan was born in a grotto located under one of the mountains near Caesarea Philippi. This grotto had a spring bubbling up which was the source of the Jordan River. Thus it was important to all the groups occupying the Holy Land.

Pan was the perfect symbol of universalism—the mistaken belief that all religions share a common root and provide pathways to the same God.

We even use the word “pan” in our language to indicate inclusiveness of different cultures under a common umbrella—such as the word “Pan American.” In theology, the word “pantheism” means that God is everyTHING around us, something quite different than saying that God is everyWHERE around us. The first belief is not Christian. The second one is.

It is against this backdrop of universalist religion (much like what pervades our culture today) that Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” “Son of Man” was the only title Jesus used to refer to Himself. Thus we can assume that Jesus wanted the disciples to tell Him what other people were saying about Him.

Jesus was providing a beginning point for the disciples’ faith expression. We are reminded in Romans 10:17 that “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.”

Jesus wanted to determine where the disciples' faith in Him had begun.

It began through the disciples hearing what other people were saying about Jesus. Some thought that He was John the Baptist returned to life. Still others said that Jesus was a re-born Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other great prophets of the Jewish faith. Through what they heard from others, the disciples' faith in Jesus was awakened as they tried to identify Jesus using descriptions of the greatest human religious leaders they had ever known. Yet none of these identifications for Jesus was adequate to describe who He was to them. The disciples could not say that Jesus was definitely any of these great religious figures. He had to be someone unique who had special meaning to each of them.

Thus Jesus transferred His questioning the disciples from the theoretical to the personal realm. "But who do YOU say that I am?"

It's easy to talk and debate in the theoretical realm where everyone has an opinion and a definitive answer does not have to be made about the person being discussed. All those who had speculated on the identity of Jesus to this point were at that level of experience with Him. It was safe because one could put forward their views of Jesus without any personal commitment to Him.

Jesus wanted to take His disciples beyond this level of theoretical speculative faith, based only on what they had heard, to the deeper level of personal faith and trust in Him as a person. Thus Jesus got very personal with them when He asked, "But who do YOU say that I am?"

As we might have guessed, it was Peter who answered Jesus' question with the words which became the central core of the gospel proclamation.

"You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." (Matthew 16:16)

Peter was no great scholar-theologian—just an ordinary guy. Yet in one sentence, Peter embraces Jesus not only as the messianic hope of Israel, the culmination of the Hebrew Covenant, but also as the complete revelation of God in the world. How did Peter know all of this? It was not through humanly acquired knowledge, but through an awareness granted by the grace of God Himself. Peter had spent nearly three years with Jesus and somehow through the grace of God, Peter saw more than met the eye about Jesus. He could see beyond Jesus' role as rabbi and see Jesus as the fulfillment, not just the interpreter of Israel's faith.

Jesus responds to Peter's confession with great joy and gives Peter a blessing loaded with meaningful symbolism. Jesus changes Peter's name from "Simon" which means "a bending reed"—"a hearer" of other people's faith to "Peter" which means "a rock" which is one of the Old Testament names for God Himself.

Psalm 18:2 for instance sings,  
“The Lord is my rock, and my fortress, and  
my deliverer.”

The change from Simon to Peter symbolizes a new phase in Peter’s faith journey. Peter progresses from relying (like a wind-swept reed) on the faith of others (bending his words to fit the occasion—such as proposing three tents to worship Moses and Elijah in addition to Jesus) to experiencing and articulating his own faith in Jesus alone. Peter’s faith became a foundational faith for the people around him who would comprise the Church.

At this point in his life, naming Peter the Rock was a vision of what he would become, but had yet to achieve. Although Peter’s character was at this point far from being a rock for the Church, he would gradually, through the grace of God, become what God intended him to be. His personal faith in Jesus would be tested many times.

Peter's character would reflect more and more a rocky bulwark resisting the challenges Satan would throw against the Church. The gates of hell would not prevail!

How does this story of Jesus and Peter affect you and me today?

We are here gathered as the Church this morning because each of us was given a foundational faith from significant people in our lives. This foundational faith drew us into the ongoing life of Christ's Church. At the same time, our lives' experiences are enabling a transformation of this foundational faith into a faith which is uniquely personal for each of us. Our Christian faith is in constant formation shaped by the blessings and challenges which have come our way. Each of us has a special story to share and I hope and pray that each of us will be **WILLING TO DO SO.**

Sharing the story of our faith journeys touches the people around us in ways that each of us can't begin to imagine. God provides countless ways these connections are made. These points of contact bring us together as the interconnecting Body of Christ.

The Body of Christ is the catalyst for the transformation of this world into the visible manifestation of the Kingdom of God. Under the sovereignty of Jesus Christ, people will know that God is their loving Father who cares deeply for them and is the source of meeting all their needs.

We each begin by asking the question featured in today's Gospel. "Who do YOU say that I am?" We each have an opportunity to respond to this question. Our responses will signal a direction in our faith journeys leading to a richer more intimate life with Jesus our Master and Friend.

As we share our stories with others our world will be transformed!