

Matthew 16: 13-20 All That and More

Sunday after Sunday, we come together as a church. And we know it's not the building but the people we mean when we say church. And we mean not just the people who are gathered in-person but also those who are here in spirit, because when someone belongs to a church, we are always One in Christ, no matter where we are.

Through Matthew's Gospel, we've been following Jesus and his disciples from a distance across time and space, as if we were curious bystanders, but in today's reading, it's as if Jesus reaches out his hand to us right out of the pages of the Bible and pulls us in and sets us among the disciples, so we can really listen. For he is going to talk about his Church. Listen now to Matthew's Gospel 16: 13-20.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, '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.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' 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. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades (the powers of death) will not prevail against it. 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.' Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

In all of the four Gospels, the word "church" is found only here and another place later in Matthew. Even though we think of Pentecost described in the book of Acts as the beginning of the Church, here in Matthew, we have Jesus declaring to his disciples, his intention, his promise and his charge to the church that he will build. And it all starts with a question about who Jesus is, or more precisely, who we say Jesus is.

First Jesus asked, addressing all disciples, "who do people think I am? And by "people" they meant other Jews. Ms. Tanya told us in her sermon last week about Jesus' interaction with a Canaanite woman, in those days, religious and cultural barriers kept people separate.

Jesus wasn't asking this question to get some information he lacked or find out something didn't know. Like a good therapist, he was asking this question to draw out of the disciples what they thought, and they told Jesus some thought Jesus was John the Baptist, while others thought the prophet Elijah, or one of other prophets. Curiously, they were big name prophets but all "no longer with us." John the Baptist was murdered, and Elijah was taken up to heaven in a

whirlwind. So, for the people to take Jesus for one of these prophets, he must be a resurrected form of the prophet; their thinking shows they had a pretty high opinion about who Jesus was.

Then Jesus asks them, what do YOU think? Who do you say I am? Again, to help the disciple articulate and give voice to what they knew in their hearts and to be able to hear it themselves, and perhaps notice how they experienced Jesus differently from the other “people.” Jesus was addressing all the disciples there, but Simon, true to his character, jumps in and answers for the rest of them, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

Now, in the Jewish tradition, the Messiah means the “anointed one,” a title for a human leader who is anointed with oil and becomes a ruler, like a king. But Simon added, the Son of the Living God. Was Jesus a prophet, yes; was Jesus a Messiah, yes; Jesus was all that and more: he was the son of the living God, in the world of fake gods and dead gods.

It was this conviction and confession that created a new community around Jesus, who believe Jesus is All That and More. Their Messiah, their Christ, was the son of the living God, who knew God most intimately and who brought us into the Divine household, making us the children of God.

Jesus blesses Simon for having declared who Jesus was, calling him by his full name, and it’s not Peter but Simon, the son of Jonah. Then, he tells Simon the son of Jonah “You are a rock, and on this rock, I will build my church.” Nowadays we think of Peter as a name, but Peter, which comes from the word meaning Rock, it did not exist as a name before Jesus called Simon, the Son of Jonah, Peter.

But Peter didn’t come to this answer about Jesus after having thought long and hard about it. The impression we get is that Peter quite characteristically blurts out this confession. Here and elsewhere, the picture of Peter we have is one who acts before he thinks and speaks before he thinks. Nonetheless, Peter “gets” who Jesus is, and his words and actions arise out of a strong conviction from within, as if it was placed there by someone.

He also is often wrong about Jesus, and those are the times when his words and action arose out of his human concerns, like when his fear of the strong wind made him sink into the water while walking, or later in this Gospel, Jesus would talk about how he must suffer and die and Peter says “Oh, no, we can’t have that happen to you! Don’t say such thing, Jesus!” Jesus would call him Satan then. Or, when Peter is torn between his desire to follow Jesus till the end, and

his fear of being known as Jesus's follower ends up betraying Jesus three times when his own safety is at stake.

On this Peter, the Rock, Jesus says he will build his church.

This tells us a lot, if not everything essential, about his church.

- It is Jesus, the son of the Living God, who does the building: the church stands on his word.
- Jesus has chosen this “not totally reliable but somehow perceiving” disciple to be the foundational material for his church.
- And his understanding didn't come from the brilliance of Peter's mind nor the strength of Peter's faith. It was the doing of the God who wants to be known by us and be in relationship with us; Peter perceived it and stepped right up.

After naming Peter as the foundational rock for his church, Jesus needs many more rocks to build the church. Peter showed us Jesus could and would use rocks that are individually imperfect, coming in all different shapes, sizes and colors, but held together by this confession the Jesus is Christ, the Son of the living God, our Savior. Jesus would use them all; we are all meant to rock!

The question about Jesus, who we say Jesus is, becomes the question of who the church is and what we are to do. Now Jesus has called the church out into being. Ecclesia is a Greek word that is often translated as “assembly” or “church,” and has the original meaning to “call out.”

Jesus then makes a promise: the Gate of Hades, that is to say, the powers of death, will never prevail against the church. Though the church suffers what the world suffers along with it, it will not be swallowed up in death. These days we hear often hear the expression “the Dying Church.” Individual congregations may close, but the church as the body of Christ, who is God's agent in and for the world, will endure throughout the history, no matter how much we mess up or how strong the opposition. God will not give up on the church.

Finally, Jesus gives a charge to his church. Jesus giving Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven doesn't mean Peter's job is to stand at the gate of heaven in afterlife and pick who gets to go in. With every ounce of his being, Jesus taught about the kingdom of heaven. In saying that

he gives Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven, Jesus entrusts the church with the authority to teach and proclaim the kingdom in his name. That's what we do as a church.

And the strange language of "binding and loosing" is how we do it. Binding and loosing is an expression rabbis used for discerning what is acceptable and what is not acceptable under the Law; it's how we apply the Law to specific situations. We often hear "the Bible Says" But if we take Jesus's charge to the church seriously, it is "the Bible says and what does that look like in this situation?"

That's what Jesus had been doing all along, interpreting the Law in the Spirit of the living God who commands us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. Jesus and the Canaanite woman, for example. The Canaanite woman came with a request, Jesus said "the Law says..." first resisting the woman's request, but then in light of the woman's faith, Jesus loosed the law and granted her request. What the church teaches, how the church interprets the teaching in the Bible and applies to our day, really matters. It's our responsibility to ask what is the life-giving way of applying God's commandments and act upon it, loving kindness, doing justice and walking humbly with our God.

We are All That... imperfect, missing the mark, of little faith, AND MORE, and that "More" comes from God who places in our hearts what we know about Jesus to be true, that we may strive to reflect the kingdom of heaven, praying, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

That's who we are and what we do, and why we are here as Christ's church. So, who do you say Jesus is? A wise teacher? An example for an ethical life? I read that George Bush said Jesus was his favorite political philosopher. He's all that and more. We the church live into that MORE of Jesus, the son of the living God.

That's what the Session does, discern how we are to translate our understanding of Jesus's teaching into the life of the church. How we spend the resources, how we interact with people, what we do with our building, how we work with the community so that what we do as a church proclaim God is at work. Today we'll form the Church Officers Nominating Committee. The Invitation is there. Join us.