

PRAY. READ Matthew 16:13-20.

Several years ago the governor of Alaska was visiting in a nursing home in Juneau. In the lobby he began to strike up a conversation with a delightful woman. After some time had passed in their conversation, the governor was a little surprised that he wasn't being recognized by this woman. "Ma'am, do you know who I am?" he asked. The woman looked at him and with a big smile on her face, she pointed to the receptionist at the front desk and said, "No, but if you ask politely, that nice lady will give you your name AND your room number."

Sometimes questions have a way of marking important moments and events, as well as teaching us some humility. Some questions can be answered easily while others take longer to answer fully. I find this especially true in our faith journeys. And today's story in Matthew's Gospel offers questions that reflect a decisive turning point between Jesus and his disciples. As Jesus and the disciples make their way through Caesarea Philippi, a predominantly Gentile city, Jesus asked the disciples a question about his identity. "Who do people say that the Son of Man is" (v. 13)? The disciples seem to easily and willingly answer Jesus' question. Most likely because it's not so difficult to share what others think. Then Jesus asked, "And what about you? Who do you say that I am" (v. 15 CEB)? According to Matthew, this is the only time Jesus asks his followers to identify who he is. It's not enough to answer Jesus' question with what other people think or to repeat what others say. Jesus wants to know what his disciples think- what they believe. This question is personal and probably harder to answer. I imagine there may have been some awkward silence on their walk that day as well as some avoiding of eye contact, looking down at feet, and kicking in

the dirt. I wonder if the disciples weren't frantically thinking to themselves, "Please someone else answer!" Then Peter blurts out as confidently as he can, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). Peter answers correctly; Jesus is the Christ, and Jesus blesses him and then explains that Peter can only make this confession of faith because God has revealed it to him. Faith, you see, is a gift from God. We cannot gain it for ourselves nor demand it from others. God, in heaven, has shown Peter this revelation about who Jesus is. Notice that Peter's claim of who Jesus is comes after several years of discipleship. But this isn't the end of the story for Peter and the disciples. Even with Peter's correct proclamation of who Jesus is, he and the other disciples don't know fully who Jesus is. At this point in Matthew's Gospel, the disciples don't know yet of Jesus' death to come on the cross or his resurrection nor of their responses to these events. Peter doesn't know that he'll become a stumbling block for Jesus in the verses that follow today's story (stay tuned for next week's sermon) or that he'll deny Jesus three times on the eve of Jesus' crucifixion. We have the advantage of knowing what is coming in terms of where Jesus is headed, but they don't. "Being able to confess Jesus as Messiah is a critical thing, but having a sense of what that means is an ongoing process. How a confession of Jesus as Christ is lived out is an unfolding, a revealing that is not expected to have its meaning contained in the confession alone" (workingpreacher.org, Karoline Lewis). Jesus, after blessing Peter's declaration of faith, nicknames Peter the rock upon which he will build his church. This verse is historically one of the Bible's most contested verses due to how it has been interpreted and debated by Catholic and Protestant Christians over the centuries. Catholics have long argued that this statement makes Peter a Pope- the first Pope in a long, long line of popes. Protestants have argued that this statement is less

about Peter and more about Peter's faith- his testimony- in Jesus Christ that is the foundation of the church. As far as we know, Peter is the first human to make the full confession that Jesus is the Christ. I wonder if the thing to remember is that it's not that Jesus had the guy it took to lead the church, it's that Peter had the God it took to lead the church and that's different. In the church, God has revealed Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ time and time again as the gift of faith has been given to others- all the way to us today- through singing, praying, proclaiming, and doing.

In high school and into college, I really struggled with my faith and what it was that I believed- not what my parents believed and had raised me to believe. I was baptized and confirmed in the church, yet my childhood image of Jesus no longer made a great deal of sense, and no one can build their faith on hearsay alone. The summer after my freshman year I needed a job and so I interviewed with Bethelwoods, a Christian camp in York, SC, where I had been a camper. I was honest with the camp leadership about the questions I had in my faith journey and that I didn't know what I believed, and they still hired me. I always say they were either extremely trusting of God at work in the world or they were desperate. Maybe both? Each week they assigned me to work with a different international, male counselor, most of whom wanted nothing to do with leading or preparing the daily Bible studies. That left me with reading scripture and praying and through this process, I experienced a rekindling of my relationship with Christ. From that summer on, I became a vegetarian to remember this transformational time in my faith journey- and yet, even though my faith and relationship with Christ grew, I still didn't have all the answers. We aren't

meant to “solve” God once and for all. We’re on a journey. Are we not always learning, really, who Jesus is? Who we are?

What about you? Who do YOU say Jesus is? “Don’t answer the question quickly; take your time. Take this question with you and reflect on who you say that Jesus is. As Christians, many of us are tempted to fall back on religious language we’ve inherited when we’re asked about our faith, language we know so well, we could recite it in our sleep”

(journeywithjesus.net, Debie Thomas). Knowing the proper titles for Jesus is not the same as understanding and embracing the way of being in the world his identity demands. Have you ever found yourself reciting the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostle’s Creed or scripture and find yourself just saying the words but not knowing what they mean to you or if you actually even believe them? A secular Jesus scholar and professor at a state university, who grew up in the church and still claims to be a Christian (after a ten year hiatus), writes of a time he was asked to come and speak to a group of Christian men. Their instructions for him? 1. Talk to us about Jesus and 2. Make it personal. He says that nobody had ever asked him to do that before. He had given hundreds of lectures about Jesus, but no one had ever said, “Make it personal.” He confesses that this request was a challenge for him. Not sure how to proceed in his preparations for his talk, he began an exercise where he simply wrote the words *Me and Jesus* at the top of a piece of paper and began to think on them. This led to lots of rich and illuminating memories and reflections about Jesus in this professor’s own life (*Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, Marcus Borg, p. 3). In doing this exercise, God opened this professor’s eyes to a deeper commitment to and understanding of who Jesus was and is in his own life’s journey.

“Who we say Jesus is has implications for how we see ourselves and others. Our belief in who Jesus is shapes the way we live” (*The Presbyterian Outlook*, Jill Duffield). Therefore, if faith is a gift from God and if Jesus builds the church, what are our responsibilities? Jesus mentions giving the keys of the kingdom of heaven to Peter. No one knows for sure what Jesus is exactly referring to here which leads to many other interpretations. Here’s what I’m pondering. Jesus didn’t choose Peter because he understood everything or had the best prayer life or was the most loyal disciple. Maybe Jesus chose Peter exactly because Peter was going to be rebuked by Jesus and would deny him three times? Maybe “Jesus knew that only a forgiven sinner could really preach the Gospel” (patheos.com, Nadia Bolz Weber)? Sinless perfect piety is not real. Therefore- and here’s the kicker- maybe only forgiven sinners can really be trusted with the keys of the kingdom?

Perhaps “what Peter learns in this encounter is that Jesus is just as powerfully present in the questions as he is in the answers? To love what is unsolved is not to deny Jesus his Lordship. It is to allow Jesus to enter more deeply into your heart than any impersonal claim about him will ever do” (Debie Thomas). At the end of today’s scripture, Jesus sternly tells the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. We don’t know exactly why. Perhaps we have to live into the fullness of what professing Jesus as the Christ really means for us before we force it onto someone else? Or maybe Jesus doesn’t want them to tell because the time hadn’t yet come for him to die? What we do know is that on the other side of today’s story, on this side of the cross and empty tomb, some 2,000+ years later, we, as Christ’s disciples, are still examining Jesus’ question for ourselves. So “as we attempt to continue to follow Jesus, always learning who he is, may we

pray that when Jesus asks us, ‘Who do you say that I am?,’ God will reveal to us the answer not only with our words, but through our very lives” (Duffield). Thanks be to God.

Let us pray. When the world looks at us, the church, who do they see, that you are, Jesus? Help us to stop and reflect on your question to each of us. We pray that through the testimony of our lives and ministry others clearly glimpse your goodness and compassion. We hope that indeed the world knows we are your forgiven sinners- your followers- by our love. Amen.