THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Living Christ* Matthew 16:13-30

The passage we just heard is one we all know quite well. We also know the pun Jesus is making out of Peter’s name—even though it is not as obvious in English as it was in Jesus’ native Aramean language. However, the thing that the pun seems to suggest—and which many have taken for truth—is that it is Peter who is the rock on which Jesus is going to build his church.

In reality, it is what Peter *said*—the truth he uttered and his commitment to it—*that* is the rock on which Jesus will build the church. It is the words of Peter’s confession on which the church continues to stand. More specifically, it is *our commitment* to that truth on which the church will or will not continue to stand and grow. It is our commitment to live Christ that builds the church.

So, the passage we heard from the Gospel of Matthew is a defining moment in the lives of the disciples. It is also a defining moment for us, too, just as it has been for believers throughout the past two thousand years. And one of the truths we must also wrestle with is the way in which every era of believers has attempted to express this truth in their own time and in their own context.

But here is the problem: as we all know expressions of Jesus’ messiahship have not always reflected who he is. And so, even while we celebrate the many places of learning that grew out of the scholarship of the people who secured and transmitted the books of the Bible throughout the generations, we must also acknowledge the many generations of indigenous stories and cultures that were suppressed and obliterated because they were judged inferior.

Even while we visit the gorgeous Christian churches all over the world that truly inspire awe and wonder, we must also admit to the way the power of the church has also been an obstacle to the difficult truths within its own institutions. And so, we continue to learn about abuses in the church suffered by generations of women and children—traditionally those who have had the least personal and corporate authority and influence.

Even while there have been charities that fed and nursed millions; even while there have been countless individuals who have sacrificed their personal comfort, have even given their lives for their faith and for others, there have also been failures for which we should not hide from but rather be courageous and confront. Confrontation is important if we are going to chart a better path for ourselves and those we hope to include. Indeed, confrontation is important if we are going to make a confession about Jesus that was is accurate and true about who he really is.

What all of this means is that more often than we care to think about, human descriptions of who Jesus is have been limited by our own projections. They have been fraught with human aspirations for power over others, over the very creation that surrounds us and that was created by God out of love, and for our comfort and thriving.

Jesus’ own response to what he knows of the human condition are in his predictions of his suffering and death—these are the very conditions he came to reverse. And so, very soon after this conversation, he will begin to tell the disciples how the world is going to receive him.

In asking Peter and the others to talk about his identity, Jesus was also asking them to express for themselves what their expectations are of him and who he is. And so, even though Peter says the right words, as we continue on in the story with him and Jesus and the disciples, we will soon discover that Peter has *not* understood Jesus and the kind of Messiah he is.

The bad news is that this has been a problem for every generation since Peter and the apostles, and it is always going to be the problem for each and every person who comes to confess Christ. We love him and the kindness he brings, but we also have trouble moving beyond our own expectations of a Messiah. This is why Jesus asked the question of his disciples, and why he continues to ask this question of us today.

So, let me be plain spoken right now: *who is this Jesus to you? What does it mean to say that he is the Messiah, that he is Christ?*

Many people will talk about what he means to them, personally, and that it fine…so far as it goes. It is fine and good that Jesus is a source of comfort and strength in our lives. However, at some point we also have to talk about who Jesus is *on his own terms;* the way in which he defined himself and his mission; the way in which he lived and lives as Christ.

In his book, *Love Wins*, author, speaker and former pastor, Rob Bell describes our situation like this:

*When people use the word “Jesus,” then, it’s important for us to ask who they’re talking about.*

*Are they referring to a token of tribal membership, a tamed, domesticated Jesus who waves the flag and promotes whatever values they have decided their nation needs to return to?*

*Are they referring to the supposed source of the imperial impulse of their group, which wants to conquer other groups “in the name of Jesus”?*

*Are they referring to the logo or slogan of their political, economic or military system through which they sanctify their greed and lust for power?*

*Or are they referring to the very life source of the universe who has walked among us and continues to sustain everything with his love and power and grace and energy?*

As we heard, when asked to tell him who the people say he is the disciples provide Jesus with four different lines of interpretation. John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets are the most prevalent theories about the identity of the Son of Man. (Matthew is the only gospel writer to include a reference to Jeremiah. Apparently, Jeremiah was one of his favorite prophets from whom to quote.)

Of course, all these men were prophets. So, this could be evidence of the people’s hope for the return of a great leader and prophet. There were quite a few people who claimed be such a person in the first century. And so, once again, we see how people were projecting their own desires on what the Messiah was or should be.

How can we avoid this very human tendency to cast Jesus in our own image? Unlike Peter, we already know the rest of Jesus’ story. We know that he did not succumb to human aspirations or fears, but continued to live as the Christ who comes to conquer through love and compassion, as opposed to domination and fear. We also know that this is because God’s whole reason for sending Jesus to live among us was so that we would come to value peacefulness among people, come to value humility rather than conceit and haughty arrogance, come to value living with each other as opposed to dominating others.

So, how shall we respond to this question?

Perhaps the best place to start is by admitting that this is one of those questions that we will need to struggle with throughout our lives. This is not a bad thing. In fact, this can be our good news—if we will allow it to be.

What I mean is that this is a question we are not meant to answer all by ourselves, even though we must answer it *for* ourself, as an individual. It is from our own sense of what we believe that we can come to connect with others with whom we may share the joys and the challenges that being a faithful follower of Christ is always going to require. Also, it is also possible that we are not meant to answer that question once-and-for-all—because “there is always more light to break forth from God’s holy Word.”

Karoline M. Lewis, associate professor of biblical preaching at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, wrote about it in this way:

*Being able to confess Jesus as Messiah is a critical thing, but having a sense of what that means is an ongoing process. The character of Peter illustrates this. It is not simply that Peter just doesn’t get it, but that one wonders if he is ever meant to get it or, for that matter, if we are. 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. This is what Jesus means, in part, about taking up our cross, about losing our lives for the sake of finding them again.*

[And so,] *our confession is about proclamation of faith, not about comprehension of faith. When we answer for ourselves, “You are the Christ,” we claim both victory over death and the promise of the resurrection.* [Whereas,] *when confession is only knowledge, then the cross is only death on a tree and the resurrection is only reward.*

Our good news is that ours is a Living Christ—a Christ who lives his expansive, unexpected way of being Christ. Jesus is the Christ who asks us to define what it means to confess him as the Messiah of God, and then he will ask us to do that again, and again, and again because he is going to continue to lead (and sometimes it will feel like pushing and prodding) but he will lead us toward wider, more compassionate, more sacrificial ways of living and being in the world.

Our good news is that we never have to do this alone. Christ, in his mercy, has given us the Holy Spirit, and each other, as companions and teachers. He has given us his love that never fails, and did not hesitate, draw back, nor fail to go forward.

Finally, our good news is that he is living and he is Christ—our Christ, our Messiah of God. Amen.