

Proper 16A
August 21, 2011
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Matthew 16:13-20

In our Gospel lesson for today, a famous passage indeed, Jesus is far out. He is far out of his normal travel zone, way to the north. Caesarea Philippi is almost in Syria. It's as if he felt the need to get away from the crowds and conflict further south in Galilee and Judaea. Getting away to some quiet and perhaps distant place sometimes helps clarify things and give you fresh perspective.

Hopefully, this summer, you'll be far out or maybe, since you retired, you are permanently far out. But I don't recommend taking your disciples with you, as Jesus did. What, you don't have an entourage? It's a probably a good thing.

So, when Jesus retreated to the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples a clarifying question, "What does the latest Gallup poll say about who people think I am? Jesus wasn't playing to the polls, but he wanted to know what the disciples would say. He wanted them to lay out the popular options.

They reported, "54% think you are John the Baptist, a dead guy! 23%, mostly end-times fanatics, think you are Elijah? 22% checked 'Other.'"

From this in-depth research it is clear the most popular opinion was that Jesus was a prophet, maybe even one of the old prophets risen from the dead. And that's accurate, as far as it goes; Jesus WAS a prophet, in the tradition of the great prophets of the Old Testament. And for some, even today, that's still about as far as it goes.

But Jesus said to them, "If I added it up right, that still leaves one percent. Maybe that's you! So, who do y'all say that I am?" (Jesus was from the south.)

You see, it was getting time to fish or cut bait. We've been at this for almost three years now. Would the understanding of Jesus' disciples rise no higher than public opinion? "Who do you all say that I am?" - is a key question for them . . . and for us. Every week, here in this place, we who have the benefit of knowing how the story turned out, say who Jesus is for us, in the Creed, especially when we affirm the Nicene Creed, and more than that, we demonstrate what we believe about Jesus, both as we as we celebrate the Eucharist, and as we live out our faith in our actions, acting as his disciples, beyond these walls. With the whole Church, this is our answer.

But those first disciples didn't yet have our post-resurrection, post-New Testament advantages. It took a lot of faith and insight for Peter to say on behalf of all of them, "**You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.**"

Messiah and Son of God weren't on that list of Gallup poll choices. For most people, including these twelve, "Messiah" meant a political and military leader who would throw out the occupying-enemy Romans and restore sovereignty to Israel. "Son of the Living God" was also a Messianic title, but one that conveyed a sense of the close relationship of the Son to the Father whom Jesus so often talked about.

So what score do you give them on the one-big-question quiz? They use the right words. They are technically right. But as we all do, Peter wanted a Messiah who agreed with his politics, a Savior to carry out an agenda of political, social, and military supremacy, a divine warrior would put an end to the forcibly imposed *Pax Romana* of Caesar and the Empire.

But God of Jesus, the Father, the true and living God, was not the captive of any set of political purposes, even those of the chosen people. Jesus came to be a different kind of Savior; he re-defined "Messiah" along the lines of Isaiah's suffering servant. Neither then nor now does God support our efforts to use God for our own well-intended personal or social agendas.

I recently had an argument online with a former colleague about American economic policy, and both of us invoked God, Jesus, and the Bible to defend our politics. And another friend quoted a prediction that the 2012 election will be about Jesus' values versus the ideology of Ayn Rand.

We all mean well when we use Jesus, and maybe one of us is right, or more right, or more left, than the other. Peter with his technically correct answer meant well too. By the way, you'll see the score Jesus gave him in next week's Gospel lesson.

But for now, Jesus affirms Peter, who was speaking on behalf of the whole group, as he often did. "How blessed you are, Peter, son of Jonah, you got the right answer! But maybe you cheated! Maybe my Father in heaven whispered the answer in your ear, but we'll count it!

I wonder, do you think that Jesus called him "son of Jonah" to remind Peter that the book of Jonah ends not with the destruction of Israel's enemies but with their repentance and God's mercy? Yes, what Peter said was true, and Peter didn't get his technically correct answer from popular opinion or from scholars of religion. He got it as a divinely given insight.

But God, that tricky and humorous deity, did not prevent Peter from misunderstanding the insight he had been given. As always, we are free to misunderstand and misinterpret, and we often do. That's why salvation depends, not on our orthodoxy, or the views of the scholars, or even less on popular opinion, but on the grace and mercy of God.

Then Jesus makes a shocking prediction. He tells Peter that he and the other apostles are the foundation on which he will build, not a holy nation, but a church, an *ekklesia*, the Old Testament *qahal Yahweh*, Yahweh's community, with no special political locus, not even Jerusalem, a pilgrim people, spread out over the world and on a journey, a body will eventually prevail, not only against the Empire, but against the very gates of Death itself. He says to them and to us, "I have a somewhat bigger agenda that you may have had in mind."

Historically, it was Peter whom God used to begin the church, along with the other apostles, and especially Paul. The community that God began in Christ and through his followers will persevere, beyond all worldly politics, unto an eternal kingdom, wherein God will put all things right. And of this body, you are members by your baptism.

And so, he gave Peter the keys of the kingdom, to open the doors and welcome all people from all nations, and to teach, along with the other apostles, the new way of life according to the law of love.

And Peter used those keys, on the Day of Pentecost and a bit later, to open the gates of the kingdom to both Jews and Gentiles, so that “whosoever will may come.” Peter exercised his authority (as did the rest of the apostles, whom Peter here and elsewhere in the NT, represents) to teach and set direction for the church. We do not see here any implication that Peter is to be the sole head of an institution that will seek to control all Christendom. The one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church is built on the authority and teaching of the apostles and the prophets with Jesus Christ himself as its head and chief cornerstone.

The Gospel lesson ends with the odd command of Jesus not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. But by now, perhaps, you’ve guessed the reason. While it initially seems strange to us that Jesus would not want his identity more widely known, this was apparently necessary to prevent misunderstanding prior to his resurrection. Post-resurrection, he commissioned us all to make his universally saving name known to the world.

Well, it’s clear that this whole Gospel account is about the identity of Jesus and the authority given to the community that Jesus intended to found, a pilgrim people who would eventually spread the good news of God’s forgiving love throughout the known world. This gospel was and is centered in the identity of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, and it continues to bring grace, peace, hope, and a new way of life for men and women who lose their way in the modern, as well as the ancient, world.

Jesus continues to query us, “Who do **you** say that I am?” And he seeks a response that, aware of God’s mercies and with truly thankful hearts, shows forth God’s praise in the world, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to his service, and by walking before our Lord in holiness and justice all our days.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.