

Towson Presbyterian Church

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Romans 12: 1-8 & Matthew 16:13-20

Who Do You Say I Am?

The end of August is upon us – can you believe it? School’s about to start, the weather is slightly changing, and I’m starting to feel the invitation to enter into the season of fall. Football, flannel shirts and Halloween are right around the corner.

For me, the fall also means a new year of youth ministry, which I am currently trying to wrap my head around – what programs to experience and what topics will we explore, and there’s Confirmation. 8th and 9th graders will have the opportunity this year to learn about what our church believes, to affirm their baptisms and finally, to make a confession.

The confession part of Confirmation is always a little tricky for me. Years ago when I was a youth director in New Jersey, we had our teens write a statement of faith describing what they believed about God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, which we also do here. And for the most part I got back these statements that sounded like they were written by a fourth century monk who had lived in a cloistered monastery somewhere in eastern Turkey. I read statements like:

- I believe in Jesus Christ, who lived a sinless life and died for our sins.
- I believe in God, the Father almighty, who created heaven and earth.
- I believe in Jesus, who was born of the Virgin Mary, who died for our sins.

Now don’t get me wrong, what they were writing was great, but I knew our teens, and that really it wasn’t them. They were telling me what they thought I wanted to hear, instead of telling me what they believed about Jesus right now, and how that belief impacted their lives right now.

And so we changed the title of the exercise to a “*Statement of Faith/Journey of Faith*,” hoping they would affirm the basic tenets of our faith tradition that we hold dear, yet at the same time inviting them to explore how they understand and experience God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit right now, today.

In today’s Gospel reading from Mathew, Jesus is asking those sorts of questions to his disciples. “*Who do the people say that I am?*” The disciples respond, “*The people say maybe John the Baptist, or one of the prophets of old who has come back.*” But Jesus digs deeper... “*Well that’s great, but who do you say that I am?*”

And Peter, who seems to always be the one to speak and act first, maybe without a healthy pause, showing a little restraint and fully thinking through the question, jumps at the chance to answer: *“You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.”*

Now make no mistake, this is a bold statement that Peter makes. That took guts and it took faith to say. And Jesus’ subsequent affirmation of Peter’s confession tells us this was a sacred moment - this was special. But it doesn’t last very long.

Our reading today ends at verse 20 and saves the next section of Matthew 16 for next Sunday’s lectionary reading. So a little preview...immediately following today’s scripture Jesus starts telling his disciples that he will soon undergo great suffering, be killed and on the third day rise again, and Peter hears this and takes Jesus aside and puts his foot down and says, *“Lord, this can’t happen. This must never happen to you!”* Which causes Jesus to turn to Peter and say, *“Get behind me, Satan! You are setting your mind on human things and not divine things.”*

Well that didn’t take very long! In 6 verses Peter goes from being the Rock on which Jesus will build his church to being called Satan. Now that’s a pretty short turn of events! The glow coming off of Peter’s face from Jesus’ prior affirmation had barely worn off.

What I am coming to love about these stories and the Bible is how it is *true*, but not in the sense of how it may have literally happened exactly as it was written, thousands of years ago, but in the sense that these stories point beyond themselves to truths that happen *in us*, individually and as a community. These stories are true in a different sort of way, but they are true nonetheless. What do I mean by this? A couple of examples:

- Abraham leaves home and starts out on a journey like we often do.
- Jacob wrestles with God, just like we will many times throughout our life
- Joseph is betrayed, like we have been and will be.
- Jesus spends time in the wilderness, alone and lonely, and God feels distant, which will happen to us at some time, if it already hasn’t.
- And Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say I am?”

That question is not only meant for Jesus’ disciples 2,000 years ago, but it’s asked to us today. This story is true in that it points beyond itself and directs that question right at us, individually and as a community. *Who do you say that I am?*

And my answer to that question has changed a lot over the years, and it’s probably going to keep on changing. And if I’m honest, it’s probably also been a different answer when I’ve been making a confession here in a church, compared to out in the world amongst friends who don’t for the most part view Jesus from the lens that we do. It’s far easier out there to say that he was a really nice guy, or not say much of anything, instead of *the Son of the Living God, the Messiah*.

I wonder if Jesus scolds Peter because in the end it’s far easier to confess that Jesus is Messiah with our lips than it is with our actions, right? I find this to be very true.

When I pause for a moment and look back upon myself years ago and what I believed about Jesus as Messiah, in short, I believed *fantastical things* about him. I believed that Jesus while on earth walked on water, he performed miracles, he turned water into wine, he miraculously fed thousands, he raised Lazarus from the dead, and he was conceived through the power of the Holy Spirit – the virgin birth.

And now, when I look back on myself, many years ago, I now say “*Good for you, Joel. Good for you.*” Because those belief statements that I made about Jesus, they were fairly easy to make. They didn’t ask anything of me, they didn’t really challenge how I lived. They didn’t impact how I related to my neighbors, or how I used my finances, or how I cared for the earth, or where I was investing my time and energy, or how well I was learning how to forgive. They didn’t ask anything of me.

This question that Jesus asks his disciples is posed to each of us, too, today. *Who do you say that I am???* *What does it mean to you that Jesus is Messiah?* I encourage you to take a few moments this week and write down an answer, even if it’s just a couple sentences. Try and answer that question. Your answer might have changed from a year ago. It most likely has changed from 5 or 10 years ago. I hope it has!

Let me give it a shot. How do I answer this question today...

Jesus points us to, reveals and exemplifies the limitless and unending love of God. In the manner in which he lived and spoke of God – a God who loves, forgives, who is with us and for us - he invites us to accept that we have been accepted by this God. In the way in which he cared for the poor, or for those who were bearing the burdens that life can bring, he described a God with a heart that deeply cares. In his compassion for those who were suffering, he described a God whose heart breaks when we are suffering.

In the way in which he welcomed and accepted the outsider – those that society had declared unworthy, he affirmed the sacredness of each human being. In the way in which he broke down walls that culture and religion defined who was in and who was out, he affirmed the image of God that is found in each human being. And in his death and resurrection he showed us that we belong to God, and that God is in the business of breathing new life into areas where death has taken over.

Now that’s a brief first draft, it’s a little short, and it needs a second and third draft, but this confession that I just made, *it asks something of me.* It’s fairly easy to make a statement about Jesus being the Messiah, but it’s much harder to articulate what that means and how it impacts how we live, *today.*

Three Saturdays ago I was down in North Carolina on vacation when word started to break about all that was happening in Charlottesville, Virginia. And a little tension built up in me, knowing that I needed to be on vacation at that moment, and yet still wanting to be here with you, my community of faith, so we could talk about this, so we could

wrestle with this, so we could pray, so we could sing, so we could grieve, and so we could also begin to hope.

What I believe about Jesus as Messiah has a lot to say regarding what happened in Charlottesville, and about racism and white supremacy, for I believe the manner in which Jesus spoke, acted and described God, he exemplified the sacredness of each human being, regardless of their skin color, ethnicity, sexual orientation or socio-economic status. And that belief, in Jesus as Messiah, it asks something of me. It does not allow me the opportunity to be passive. My understanding of Jesus as Messiah impacts how I believe I am called to live and love my neighbors, today.

And so what does it mean to you that Jesus is Messiah? Because how we answer that question will directly impact who we are to be, individually, and as a community of faith, moving forward.

In the second half of our Gospel reading Jesus says that he will give Peter and his church the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever is bound on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever is loosed on earth will be loosed in heaven. Jesus gives his church great authority and great power. And this church can bring new life, and freedom, and justice, and liberation and hope, and at the same time it can do the complete opposite.

Confessions, statements of faith, and creeds can sometimes feel as if they are meant to be a way to stroke God's ego, or tell Jesus how great we think he is.

No.

Instead, they are meant to invite us into a life where we together live into God's power and God's love.

Who do you say that I am??? Now that's a really good question.