

Sermon: "Defining Jesus"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Matthew 16:13-20 (NRSV)

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" [14] And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." [15] He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" [16] Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." [17] 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. [18] And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. [19] 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." [20] Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

WHO WAS JESUS?

Who was Jesus really? This has been the big question down through the years, and it's still a big question today. Who was Jesus?

Was he a leader of a small time revolt that was destroyed by the Roman government long ago?

Was he an untrained rabbi who had an unusual way of interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures?

Was he a prophet who wanted to change society in the name of God?

Was he a miracle worker who was able to walk on water and raise the dead?

All these interpretations and more have been given to Jesus down through the years. Will the real Jesus please stand up? Opinions still vary when it comes to Jesus.

A recent special on PBS was entitled "From Jesus to Christ." The thesis of this show was that Jesus was just a man, a failed revolutionary who was crucified for his beliefs. However, in the years after his death Jesus was transformed into a Messiah figure by overenthusiastic followers. In other words the legend of Jesus grew over time.

If you ask people who was Jesus question today you'll find that many people believe this is true. They think that the church has claimed too much when it comes to Jesus. Jesus may have been a good teacher or even a heroic person. But, he was not God in the flesh.

This is also a big sticking point in our relationship with other religions. People are quite willing to say that Jesus was a great man or a prophet or even a person of great power. But, they cannot

say that Jesus was the Son of God. In their minds that would be blasphemy. It wouldn't fit into their idea of what God is like and how the world works.

WHO DO THE PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM?

Isn't it interesting that if we asked the same question that Jesus asked his disciples long ago, the answers would be much the same today? Long ago Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do the people say that I am?"

Some people suggested that he was the reincarnation of John the Baptist, a person of power and courage. Some people suggested that he might be a prophet like Jeremiah or Elijah.

The text doesn't mention this, but some people also wondered out loud if Jesus might be the Messiah. The Messiah in their view was not the incarnation of God but a special leader who was empowered by God. This leader would be a military and political hero. He would be a person like Moses would be charged to set God's people free.

On several occasions the people even tried to force Jesus into that role. They tried to make Jesus their king. But, Jesus steadfastly refused. Though Jesus asked what the people were saying about him, his mission was never determined by what the people were saying about him.

TRYING TO PLEASE THE PEOPLE

In this way Jesus is quite different from many of our leaders today. We live in an age when our leaders often allow themselves to be defined by the latest opinion poll or focus group. The politicians ask, "What do the people want, and how can I become that person?"

And I would suggest that though the voice of the people should certainly be considered and heard, it is dangerous in matters of politics and in matters of faith to forsake our true identity in search of popularity and success. We cannot let ourselves be defined by the whims of public opinion.

Jesus certainly did not do that.

He may have been interested in what the people said about him, but he was not defined by their evaluation. In fact, Jesus quite often told the people exactly what they didn't want to hear.

There's an amusing commercial that touts kosher hot dogs with the phrase, "we answer to a higher power." In a more serious vein this was what made Jesus special. He not only answered to a higher power. He was that higher power. He amazed the people because he taught as one who had authority.

Jesus did not become the warrior king that the crowd wanted nor did he quit preaching when the political and religious powers challenged him. As Jesus would later tell Pilate before he was crucified, "My kingdom is not of this world."

But, quite often the kingdom as defined by the church has been very much of this world.

I like to think of myself as a successful person and often success is defined in the world by how much money I make and the authority that I wield. Nobody ever made a TV show entitled lifestyles of the poor and the obscure. But, there was a TV show entitled "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous." This is how the world measures success.

This is nothing new. For many years the ministry of the church was distorted because this was how we measured success. We cared too much about what people were saying about Jesus and not enough about what Jesus actually said.

THE NICENE CREED

Whenever I think about the identity of Jesus, one of the first things I think about is the Nicene Creed. The Nicene Creed (which is one of the official statements of faith in the Presbyterian Church) is the product of a gathering of church officials in 325 AD. It can be found in the front of your hymnal.

We read it sometimes as an affirmation of faith. But, we don't read it too often because the language seems so odd and stilted to us today.

But, the Nicene Creed is very important. It was written to answer the question that we ask today. Who was Jesus? Was he a prophet? Was a person of power? Or was he the Messiah, the Son of God?

There were some in those early days of the church who were saying that Jesus was not the Son of God. They used a lot of tricky language to hide what they believed, and that's why the Nicene Creed is the way it is.

It is written in very precise Greek to answer the question about Jesus. Who was Jesus? The Nicene Creed says in very precise language that Jesus was not just a teacher or a miracle worker or God's adopted Son. Jesus was "very God of very God." Jesus was of one "substance" or of one "being" with God.

The language was precise so that the unorthodox theologians couldn't use "weasel words" to say something else. And for all these years the Nicene Creed has been the standard of orthodoxy when it comes to the identity of Jesus. Who was Jesus? Jesus was God in the flesh, very God of very God, of one being with God.

PETER'S CONFESSION

Of course there was really nothing new in that statement. Peter said it long ago.

After Jesus asked his disciples what others were saying about him, he asked a more direct question, "But, what about you? Who do you say that I am?"

And Peter replied, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." This confession of faith is found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), and in the Gospel of John this confession is made in different ways from the beginning to the end.

It is so plain in the Bible that we shouldn't need a book of Creeds and Confessions to confirm it. Jesus is God in the flesh. If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus.

This is the foundation of our faith. We still sing, "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord."

And most importantly this confession is a revelation. It does not come from what people believe about God but from what God has chosen to reveal. We don't climb up to God. God comes down to us.

Jesus told Peter, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven."

Peter didn't understand about Jesus because he was such a bright guy. Peter's confession was God's special revelation to him.

And according to Jesus, the keys to the kingdom are contained in this confession. This confession is all we need for salvation.

DON'T TELL

And yet Jesus says something very curious to Peter and the other disciples. "Don't tell anyone. Keep this amazing revelation to yourself."

I have often wondered why Jesus told the disciples to keep quiet about this. Usually I've interpreted this passage in light of what follows.

In the passage that follows our lesson for today Jesus once again talks about the fact that his definition of being a Messiah will be very different from how the world would define a Messiah. He will not conquer by lording it over people but by dying for the sins of the world. It is through the selfless act that the world will be able to see the truth about God.

Peter knew what was coming next. If Jesus was going to bring in the kingdom through selfless suffering that would mean that the disciples would have to follow that same path. And Peter wanted none of it. So Peter rebuked Jesus. Peter said, "God forbid such a thing would happen."

And Jesus turns to Peter, the one who had just received the truth about God in Jesus, the one who was blessed, the one who had the keys to the kingdom and Jesus said, "Get behind me Satan."

Apparently, there was good reason for Jesus to keep the disciples quiet when it came to his identity. The disciples had the identity question right, but they were wrong about the details of the heavenly kingdom.

And as we say - the devil is in the details. In this case it was literally true. Rejecting the sacrificial way of Christ was tantamount to rejecting Christ and embracing the devil.

GOOD THEOLOGY AND BAD BEHAVIOR

This was not just a problem for the early disciples. This has been a problem for us as well.

Christian leaders have often thought that if only we could get our statements about Jesus right, then we would have the keys to the kingdom. But, it's not that simple. Sometimes good theology can lead to bad behavior.

Constantine, the Emperor of Rome was the first potentate to accept Christianity and make it the official religion. It was Constantine who gathered church leaders at the Council of Nicea and insisted that they come up with an orthodox statement about the nature of Christ. We have Constantine to thank for one of the most important works of theology in the Christian Church.

But, Constantine's conversion was incomplete. He had churches built but he also continued to worship the sun gods that his ancestors worshipped.

He called upon the name of Jesus but instead of sacrificing his life to Jesus he had the symbol of the Christian faith put on the shields of his soldiers. He supposedly had a dream that by this sign he would conquer.

You see Constantine grew up worshipping a god who was about power and the ability to defeat enemies. And he never really stopped worshipping that god. He never stopped worshipping power.

Constantine rightly believed that Jesus was the Son of God, but he could not understand a King who would sacrifice all power in order to save. He could not understand a Savior who lowered himself in order to lift up the world.

Constantine took Jesus' name, Jesus' God and even Jesus' cross and turned them into symbols by which he hoped to conquer and rule.

A SYMBOLIC BANNER

We shouldn't be too hard on Peter or Constantine because we often do the same thing. We take the name of Jesus and then use that name to do what we want to do. Constantine proved that even the cross can be turned into a sword.

In fact, you can see that represented in the banner in our sanctuary that is emblematic of the Nicene Creed. The cross has a point on the bottom. The cross has been transformed into a sword!

Of course we would say that the sword is symbolic and represents the sword of the Spirit or the sword of God's word, but it also reminds us of a deeper, more disturbing truth.

Sometimes we take the most sublime of revelations and distort them into something quite sinister. We can even transform a cross into a sword. We can even transform a symbol of self-sacrifice into a symbol of power and conquest.

TRUE FAITH

Faith in Jesus is not just about making right statements about him. Faith in Jesus is a willingness to follow Jesus. Faith in Jesus is being willing to give up power and prestige to serve the least among us.

Faith in Jesus doesn't mean that we gain the strength to defeat our enemies. Faith in Jesus means that we gain the strength to love, forgive and be gracious to our enemies.

Rick Warren, the pastor of a mega-church is on the cover of Time Magazine this week. Rick has made millions of dollars with his best selling books on the "purpose driven life," books that talk about the fact that it's not about me, it's about God's plan and purpose for our life.

Some have even suggested that Rick will be the "next Billy Graham" or the next "Jerry Falwell."

But, Rick began to understand that his flirtation with power was in conflict with his message. He believed that God was telling him that his ministry had in some ways become all about Rick.

And as Rick put it God told him that he didn't care "squat" about what happened to the poor. To Rick's credit he took that to heart and has led this huge church in some major programs to help those in need.

But, his story suggests once again that right theology does not necessarily lead to right action. We are all prone to make it all about us instead of God. And we must fight against that trend all our lives.

THE PETER PRINCIPLE

When I was in college I learned about something called the Peter Principle. It's named after author Peter Drucker. The Peter Principle goes something like this. People are promoted to their level of highest incompetence!

In other words quite often people quit getting promotions when they can't do the job any more so they get stuck at that level. The person and the company suffer because of that phenomenon.

I think the church often suffers from its own Peter Principle. Like Peter we make a correct statement about Jesus, but we do not follow Jesus.

Instead we promote ourselves to Messiah level. We make rules based not upon what Jesus says but upon what we think is right and good. And you know what friends? We make very bad Messiahs! We get stuck in our spiritual life, and the whole community of faith can suffer.

We saw several weeks ago what happens if we try to walk on water and in the meantime take our eyes off Jesus. Peter sank like a rock and so will we.

We will never reach the point when we can say, “Yes, I’ve got the keys to the kingdom. I understand completely. I have all the answers.” Jesus will often surprise and dismay us with the path that he calls us to tread.

We will be afraid and often we will be tempted to suggest that God has it wrong. Surely God wouldn't call us to behave in a way that is so different from what the world thinks is right and true.

And maybe that's a good way to determine if we are indeed following Jesus. If we feel smug and self-satisfied, if we feel that we have all the answers watch out! We're on the wrong path.

But, if we feel like God is calling us to do the impossible, something that goes against what we really want to do, something that calls us to look for the presence of God in the struggles of humanity then maybe we're on the right track. Maybe we have been given a glimpse of glory, a revelation of God's will for our lives in Christ Jesus.

ONE OF US

Several years ago there was a song nominated for a Grammy entitled “One of Us.” The song asked the question, “What if God was one of us - just a stranger on the bus trying to make his way home?”

Some believers were offended by that song. They saw it as a cynical put down of the Christian faith. The idea of meeting God on the bus seemed to border on heresy.

But, today's lesson teaches us that this is indeed the central affirmation of the Christian faith. God has met us as a human being.

But, the problem for most of us is that we first encounter the idea of God in some other way. We are told about God through the doctrines of the church in a Sunday school lesson or we think about God through the visual representation of a stained glass window. We see Jesus portrayed in those classic portraits with a halo over his head.

And we have a hard time imagining the stranger on the bus with a halo over his head.

But, maybe we should. The keys to the kingdom are not found in the halls of power or in our delusions of glory. The keys to the kingdom are not found in personal success.

The keys to the kingdom are found when we see in the human being Jesus the power and grace of God. And the Bible suggests that this will also be the key in the future as well.

Matthew's gospel spells it out so that we can't miss it.

The scene is the final judgment. The sheep are being separated from the goats. The good are being separated from the bad. And, in the final analysis what makes the difference? It's not what they say about Jesus. It's about those that they serve in Jesus' name.

When the weak brother or sister is served sacrificially in Jesus' name, it is more than a good deed. It is an encounter with the living God. God is present in acts of mercy and love.

Try to imagine it this week.

Try to imagine halos over those strangers on the bus.

Try to imagine a halo over that difficult student or that boss who is angry.

Try to imagine a halo over that person whose political philosophy is diametrically opposed to what you believe. Try to imagine a halo over that street person who is trying to solicit a donation that you suspect is going to the wrong place.

Faith does take right theology.

Like Peter we are blessed to know that God was in Christ. But, faith also takes imagination as well. Faith requires that we see the halo over the human face in need or even over the face of our enemy. Faith requires more than right answers. Faith requires right actions as well.

Don't tell so many people about Jesus. Telling can often lead to misunderstanding.

Show them. Do what faith requires. Let others see Jesus in you and learn to see Jesus in others.

Those are truly the keys to the kingdom.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN