

“Who do you say that I am?” The disciples have learned and witnessed a lot by the time Jesus asks them this question. They had listened to Jesus preach about the blessedness of peacemakers and the poor in spirit, heard him proclaim that they should love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. They had heard numerous parables and teachings, and witnessed Jesus heal countless numbers of people suffering from both mental and physical illnesses. They had been sent out by Jesus to proclaim his good news to the people of Israel. They watched Jesus calm a storm and walk on water. And they collected 12 baskets of left-over food after Jesus commanded them to feed thousands of people with only 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread. They certainly had many conversations as they walked throughout Galilee up to the northern edge of the area Jesus traveled to the city of Caesarea Philippi. This ancient Roman city named for the Emperor Caesar Augustus was 130 miles from Jerusalem. It was home to a white marble temple built by Herod the Great in honor of Caesar. The city exuded imperial power, military strength, victory through domination and intimidation.

As Jesus and the disciples enter the district of Caesarea Philippi, our text reads “Jesus asked them, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’” Rev. Dr. Mark Davis proposes this verse should be translated to read “Jesus was asking them, ‘Who are people saying the Son of Man is?’”¹ This slight shift in wording indicates that this was an ongoing conversation and question. This wasn’t an interrogation by Jesus but rather a conversation as they walked along the dusty road. I have read and been told of two different ways to understand this question that Jesus is asking. The first is that Jesus is

¹ <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2014/08/peter-fesses-up.html>

asking the disciples who people think HE is. Who do people say I am? But why wouldn't Jesus have simply asked it that way? Why instead did he ask "who are people saying the Son of Man is?" Another way I have read and heard this interpreted is explained when we understand the phrase "the Son of Man." As Christians, we often automatically associate this title with Jesus. But the phrase the "Son of Man" was a term in the Jewish tradition to refer to a human or a heavenly figure who would pronounce God's judgement on oppressive rulers at the end of the age.² Once we know this, it seems that Jesus might not be asking the disciples who people think *HE* is, but rather, he is asking who the people think might return at the end times as the bringer of God's judgement on oppressive rulers. They respond with John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. Then Jesus turns the conversation to his identity. Based on the answer to the first question, it appears that "the people" do not believe Jesus is the one called the "Son of Man." So he asks the disciples "who do you say that I am?"

The same grammatical shift that Rev. Davis makes in verse 13 is also true for the question in verse 15 which he suggests should be read "But who are you saying me to be?" This verse has been interpreted by some to be a pop-quiz of sorts in which Jesus is testing the disciples to see if they give the correct answer. But instead, Rev. Davis proposes that Jesus is asking the disciples "what they are contributing to the buzz about him." What have they been saying to people about the identity of Jesus? Peter, who in Matthew is often portrayed as the spokesperson for all of the disciples, responds with "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

² New Interpreter's Bible p. 1244

This statement is what is known as Peter's "confession." The word confession here does not mean revealing a sin one has committed, but instead is a proclamation of one's beliefs. Peter declares, or confesses that he, and likely the rest of the disciples, believe, and have been telling people, that Jesus is the messiah. Jesus praises Peter and declares that he is blessed because he did not come to this understanding about Jesus by human reasoning or convincing, but through a revelation of God. In next week's Gospel text we will hear how Peter and the disciples really don't understand what kind of Messiah Jesus is, but we won't go there this morning. Today we will simply pause to celebrate this moment with Peter.

I think we all have moments in our lives when we are more in tune with God's purpose or the ways in which God is at work in us and through us. So much of the time it might feel like we have no understanding of what God is doing or what God desires. Or we feel like we are constantly falling short of how we "should" act or believe as faithful people. Peter, is no exception. He wants to trust and believe in Jesus. When he sees Jesus walking on the water he asks Jesus to call him out of the boat to walk with him on the water. He is the one who in this moment of conversation, he proclaims without equivocation, that Jesus is the Messiah. And yet, like Peter, we are not perfect followers of Jesus. Once on the water, Peter feels the wind and is frightened and he begins to sink. After declaring Jesus the Messiah, he goes on to second guess Jesus' plans, denies knowing him once Jesus is arrested, and abandons him at the cross.

But regardless of his past and future shortcomings, Jesus recognizes God's blessing upon Peter and entrusts him with what Jesus calls "the keys of the kingdom of

heaven.” That seems like an awful big responsibility for someone so flawed. But again, this comes down to a matter of interpretation. What does it mean to possess the keys to the kingdom of heaven? Many of you have probably heard this interpreted as Peter being the gatekeeper of heaven. Like an celestial bouncer, Peter decides who gets into heaven and who has to go somewhere else. But what if the kingdom that Jesus is talking about is not some gated community in the sky, but instead the reign of God’s purposes here on earth? What if the kingdom of heaven is a replacement for the oppressive, greedy, and corrupted kingdoms, empires, and countries under whose rule people are treated unequally and are viewed as resources to increase the GDP? What would it mean for Peter to have the keys to that kingdom?

As the leader of the emerging faith community that is growing around Jesus and continues to evolve and emerge after Jesus’s death and resurrection, Peter in many ways represents the wider church – the community of followers of Jesus throughout time and around the world who seek to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth. The church, beginning with Peter, is tasked with inviting people into a communal life that reflects God’s purpose. Maybe the keys are not physical keys for a literal gate, but instead are metaphorical keys to unlock the mystery of what it means to live into God’s purpose. This isn’t about converting people to our flavor of Christianity, or convincing individuals to accept Jesus as their personal Lord and savior as many of our evangelical siblings dedicate their lives to doing. In fact, at the end of our scripture this morning, Jesus does not instruct Peter and the disciples to go and spread the news that Jesus is

the Messiah. He does quite the opposite. He sternly orders them to not tell anyone that he is the messiah. Why do you think that is?

The Rev. David Lose of Luther Seminary “There is so much going on in the world right now, that needs our effort and work and passion and commitment. We are being called – in our individual lives and communal lives – to confess Christ – the suffering Christ who sided always with the vulnerable – in both word and deed.³ I wonder if Jesus was saying to Peter and the disciples – “I’d like to see less talk and more action.” Peter saying the words “You are the messiah” is awesome! This verbal confession of his faith is celebrated and deemed a blessing. But I don’t think that’s most important. Jesus shows the disciples that you must put your actions where your words are. Show the people that you believe I am the messiah by acting like it. I have been wondering this week what it means to confess Christ with our actions in this midst of all that is happening in the world. Whether you view Jesus as one member of the Holy Trinity, or the son of the living God, or a human being with a deep and intimate relationship with the divine, or a prophet, or an allegorical figure, how do your actions confess that you are a follower of that Jesus in your life? How do we confess Christ in a world where thousands of people are devastated by flooding and hurricane damage in southern Texas? How do we confess Christ when our transgender siblings are being told they are too much of a burden or a distraction to serve in the military? How do we confess Christ in the midst of white supremacy? How do we confess Christ when a law enforcement official who is guilty of inhumane conditions on the level of torture and convicted of

³ <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/08/pentecost-12-a-pausing-to-give-thanks/>

racial profiling are given a pass and allowed to walk free without consequence? It can feel impossible and overwhelming leaving us unsure how to move forward.

David Lose gives us some insight here as well. He writes “At one and the same time we that know there is so much more to do than we seem able to do and that even our best efforts and most heartfelt attempts will fall short, not living as deeply or truly into our confession as we should.... And yet there are moments when we confess, when we do something right, when we perceive more of God’s purpose than previously, when things come together if only briefly, and when we sense God’s spirit at work in us and among us. And at those moments, it makes sense to pause and give thanks.”

How we live into a confession of Christ will look different for each one of us. Some of us may feel called to advocate for legislative changes that makes hate speech a crime instead of a protected form of expression under the constitution. Some of us may give a pint of blood or a financial donation to the Red Cross as a way of responding to hurricane Harvey. Some of us may stand up for someone being bullied because of their gender identity or the way they dress or the color of their skin. Some of us may simply start by writing cards or making phone calls to people who are lonely.

Whatever it is that each of us feel called to do or to say, in each moment, may our lives answer the question “who are you saying I am?” with evidence of abundant love, radical welcome, and moments of celebration and praise for God’s presence in our lives. May it be so. Amen.