

August 23, 2020

Matthew 16: 13-20

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Who He Is and Who We Are”

There’s an old hymn that sings, “Tell me the stories of Jesus I love to hear; things I would ask him to tell me, if he were here...” And, we do, of course, love the stories. We love to read and hear the gospel because they reveal who Jesus is. You wouldn’t be giving this time on a late summer’s day to connect and worship in this way if you were not already convinced of the importance of Jesus to your life. Knowing him is central to our faith. This is why we say: Jesus is our rock and our redeemer. The foundation of our life with God depends upon our knowing who he is. What then do the stories of Jesus reveal about him? Well, his identity has many facets. Like a gemstone cut to bend the light at different angles, there are many sides to Jesus that create the reality of who he is. Among the many sides of him, he is a healer, bringing the restorative power of God into the lives of those who are wounded or weak. He is a comforter, assuring those who are troubled that a new way is possible. He is a challenger, pushing against systems of authority that cater to the privileged. He is a teacher, making the deep mysteries of God accessible, and he is a rescuer, reaching out to those no one else will touch and welcoming them into the Kingdom of God. We call Jesus the “Christ” because a story like the one we’ve heard today identifies him that way, and because the title of “Christ” captures the full power of who he is. “Christ” is how the Greeks say it and “Messiah” is the name the Hebrews use. To say Jesus is Messiah is to say he is the anointed one, sent from God, who brings God’s agenda to bear on the world. He is the one who saves all of us from the grip of sin and death. Yes, tell me the stories of Jesus because to know who Jesus is is to know that we are with God and that God is with us, and knowing that helps everything else find its place.

Now, the things you’ve heard me say to this point in the sermon are reasonable and theologically sound. There’s nothing wrong with talking about Jesus as our Savior and our Redeemer, except that for our purposes today it’s all just a little too churchy, if you know what I mean. In other words, to answer the question of who Jesus is with only the traditional language of the church is to miss what’s happening in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” This question of Jesus to those who are following him is just a lead in to the real question Jesus wants to ask, and that question is, “Who do you say I am?” There is the layer of knowledge of what others say about Jesus, including the great theologians of our faith, and what the historic creeds say about him, and what the songs we sing about him say. Available to us is all the information of what others know about Jesus but the deeper layer that seems to concern Jesus most is what we say about him. Who is he to us, and how does who he is impact who we are called to be in the world?

One of the keys in opening up who Jesus is for us is knowing where he was when he asked his disciples what they said about him. The gospel tells us they have come to the territory of Caesarea Philippi. In that city there was a temple built by Herod the Great to honor the Roman emperor, Augustus Caesar. When Herod died he bequeathed the city to his son, Philip, and so Caesarea Philippi was like a monument to the power and authority of Rome, a political and military power that believed Caesar was god and that all should bow down and serve the purposes of Rome. But even more interesting, there was a deep cave in the mountainside next to Caesarea Philippi that had a long history with the pagan religions of the day. The cave was so deep it was called The Gates of Hades, believed to be the opening to the underworld, where spirits and counter powers could break loose and infect the earth with terrible trouble. Some say it is no coincidence that a city built to be a testimony to Caesar’s power would be aligned with the Gates of Hades because all hell broke loose every time Rome raised its hand against those who were weaker or questioned the emperor’s authority. Can we see the deeper picture now? How amazing that Caesarea Philippi is the place where Jesus clarified who he is and how significant that when Peter says to Jesus, “You are the Messiah” Jesus says to Peter, “and you are the rock on which I will build my church and not even the Gates of Hades will prevail against it.”

When we think about who Jesus is to us the fullness of him includes more than just the healing, comfort and peace he brings to us as individuals. Jesus is the one who builds a life of faith that is so strong no counter power on the earth can stand. I often need to be reminded that Jesus is more than just my personal savior. Jesus saves me and you, yes, but he also comes to challenge the authority and power structures of the world that work against his mission and message. A webcast series in our church has just ended based on the book “Reckless Love” by pastor Tom Berlin. The message of the book challenges us to know that not only are we loved by God but we are called to live out the love of God, pushing against expressions that are counter to that love, even establishing new ways of being love for one another. The struggles in our own culture around racism and against other systems of injustice are not just political issues. For Christians, the issues take us to the bedrock of our faith and to who Jesus is for us, and to the call placed upon our lives by God to receive love, and share love, and be love for one another. I think if Jesus

were physically with us today he would stand right in the middle of all of the mess and ask us, “Who do you say that I am?” He would say, “I am building a life of faith on a rock that will not be shaken in the face of attitudes, systems, powers that are counter to my love for the world.”

It’s with this awareness that I end my message today with an invitation. As we head into the month of September, a special program will invite our participation to watch several films and then connect online for discussion and learning, all with the idea of discovering how we can overcome racism and more solidly be with Jesus in assuring that the hurtful ways of thinking about those who are different will no longer prevail. I hope you’ll be looking for that information and that you’ll be open to how you can be involved.

The church sings, “Tell me the stories of Jesus...” We listen to these stories not just so we can ask Jesus questions if he were here but to respond to his question when he asks us, “Who do you say that I am?” Lord, help us know you so we can know who you call us to be.