

August 27, 2017: Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A)  
Matthew 16:13-20: The Most Important Question

I think we could all agree this morning that life is full of choices. Every day we are given countless opportunities to make all kinds of decisions. We are presented with options, usually in the form of a question, and we are invited to choose a particular course of action. In the big scheme of things, most of the decisions we make are of little significance, but a few of them, can altar the course of our lives completely and can have life-changing consequences.

Most people would agree that one of the most important decisions a person could make is who they will go through life with. It is becoming less true in our society, but Christians, at least, believe that this decision is finalized through the act of marriage. It is the ultimate way of saying to another individual, I want us to do this thing called life, together. So for many people, who they should marry is one of the most important questions they will ever answer.

I say many because some people choose to stay single. There is nothing wrong with that choice. I heard a sermon once where the preacher argued that a choice to be single was actually closest to the ideal set forth by Jesus. Jesus never married. If you are single you have more time to devote to prayer and service to God than someone who is married. If you are single you are more like Jesus. But if you are married, you have more opportunities to work on developing the virtue of patience. At least that is what my wife tells me.

As I was saying, if a person decides to get married, the question they will have to answer is, "Who do I want to spend the rest of my life with?" And it is one of the most important decisions they will ever make. The consequences of this decision can certainly be far-reaching and life-changing. We all know someone whose spouse has made their life miserable. I'm not suggesting that it isn't possible for a marriage to fail even if two people make the right decision. Only that people should make the decision with their eyes wide open, not blinded by emotions or pressured by circumstances.

As important as that question is, there is another that is even more important. It is the question Jesus presented to his disciples in our text today, "Who do you say that I am?" In Jesus' day everyone who had heard about him had formed some opinion of who he was. Some said he was John the Baptist or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or some other prophet, back from the dead. Jesus knew all that. What he really wanted to know is what the disciples believed for themselves. Peter was quick to respond for all of them, "You are the Messiah. The Son of the Living God." He was correct, but what did it mean for Peter and the other disciples to come to that conclusion?

For starters, it meant that they were blessed. First, they were blessed in the sense that the ability to recognize Jesus' true identity was a gift in and of itself. Anybody who answers Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" correctly, can only do so because God has graciously given him or her the answer. Jesus' statement here was meant to serve as a reminder to Peter and the other disciples that the only reason they could arrive at this conclusion was by God's grace, not because they were especially smart, or insightful. In fact, the opposite was true.

They were also blessed in the sense that they became part of a community, made up of all others who shared in this confession. That is really what it was. The belief that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, would become the foundational confession of the Church. The Church, then, is comprised of anyone and everyone who believes this about Jesus. Peter and the disciples understood that they were not alone in their efforts to follow Jesus.

One other assurance they were given is that this community they were now a part of could never be destroyed, not even by the power of death itself. They would face many challenges. Many of them would be persecuted, some would even lose their lives, but the Church, the body of Christ, would somehow remain intact, eventually witnessing God's complete and final destruction of evil and sharing in Jesus' victory over death. But Jesus gave them no time frame. While they were waiting for all this to take place, they had some important responsibilities, especially Peter.

Jesus referred to Peter as a rock twice. In most translations you would only see the word "rock" once, but the name "Peter" literally means "rock." In English, Peter is a fairly common name, but it was not a name at all in Greek or Hebrew. Remember Peter's given name was Simon. It was Jesus who gave him the name Peter. The best way to translate this verse in English would be something like, "And I tell you, you are rock, and on this rock I will build my church."

Here Jesus was assigning Peter a leadership role in guiding the Church as they carried out their responsibilities, two of which are mentioned here. The first was holding the keys to heaven. We have all heard jokes about someone dying and going to heaven and meeting Peter at the pearly gates. Those are based on a certain understanding of this passage, that Peter has been given the authority to decide who gets in, and who doesn't, but that's not what Jesus was saying.

The first followers of Jesus were Jewish, which makes sense because Jesus was the Jewish Messiah, but God's plan in sending Jesus was not to offer salvation to Jews only, but to anyone and everyone who would receive it. It was Peter who was given a vision by God intended to explain to him that the message of the Gospel was for all people. It was Peter who took this message to the Church, and convinced them that God's gift of salvation really was for everyone.

The second responsibility the Church was given was binding and loosing. Specifically, Jesus said to Peter, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." These two actions, binding and loosing, refer to deciding what will be forbidden for followers of Jesus, and what will be permitted. This was crucial in the early days of the Church, as decisions had to be made about which of the Jewish Laws would be imposed on the non-Jewish Christians. And as the Church grew, how to apply them in different contexts and cultures.

It all started with a question...an answer...a decision

Everyone today who has heard the name of Jesus has some opinion as to who Jesus is. But when he directs that question to you, when he says to you "Who do you think I am?" he doesn't want to know what everyone else thinks, he wants to know what you think. How you answer that question is the most important decision you will ever make. More important than "Who you marry?" or "Where you go to college?" Or "What will you do for a living?" It's even more important than deciding, "Chicken Pie or Barbecue?" So thankful for the combo option. If you say he is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, all the things that held true for the first disciples also hold true for you.

You have been blessed.

By God's grace you have come to recognize the true identity of Jesus, that he is the Son of the Living God, sent to offer his gift of salvation to the world.

By God's grace you have become a part of a community of people who share in that confession. You are not alone following Jesus. And this community that you are now a part of, will last forever. No matter what forces gather against it, even the power of death itself, it will not be defeated.

With this blessing comes responsibility.

You are part of the community that possesses the keys to heaven. Again, this is not deciding who is in and who is out, but opening the door to everybody who would enter, declaring that God's gift of salvation is for everyone, and telling them how to receive that gift.

You are part of the community that is meant to serve as the world's moral compass, tasked with the roles of binding and loosing, declaring what is forbidden and what is permissible, and through prayer, discerning what following Jesus looks like in this day and time, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, being an example for a world that is watching.

When you first made a decision to follow Christ, to join with so many others and made that most foundational confession, that he is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, it's very possible your answer was driven by emotion. Maybe you were in the midst of a powerful worship service, the Holy Spirit was present, and you got caught up in the moment.

If not driven by emotion, maybe your answer was driven by circumstances. You decided to follow Jesus because the rest of your family does. Or because it is just the American thing to do, especially the Southern thing to do. Or because all of your friends were doing it. Or because of some traumatic event in your life.

Those emotions and circumstances that compelled you to first make the confession, that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Those are not necessarily bad things. But at the end of the day, if you are going to live a life that is consistent with your answer, there has to be more than that. Next week we will see Jesus raising the stakes even higher as he continues to explain to his disciples even more of the consequences of following him.

But the one who calls us is faithful. He who began this work in us will bring it to completion as we continue to put our trust in him and in his grace, and his love for us.