

Sunday December 17, 2023

First Lesson Proverbs 3: 5-6

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 16: 13-20

Sermon Series: Questions that Move Mountains: Who do you say I am?

- We are in week 6 of an 8 -week sermon series called “Questions that Move Mountains?” This is a sermon series that invites us to unpack the questions that Jesus either asked or inspired; with the hope that our repeating First Lesson of Focus ; Proverbs 3: 5-6 that says to *Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.*In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths; will take root into our hearts.
- This week the question that we are unpacking to kick off our Advent season is Jesus’s question to the disciples, “Who do you say I am?”
- Before unpacking this question directly, I would like to talk little bit about the third candle that we lit this

morning and its significance to our conversation;
the candle of joy.

- With the lighting of the third candle, our hearts are lifted in joy as we draw nearer to the celebration of Christ's birth.
- The shepherds in the fields experienced great joy upon hearing the angelic proclamation of the Messiah's arrival.
- As followers of Christ, our joy is not rooted in circumstances but in the profound truth of Emmanuel, "God with us."
- Therefore the hope from this powerful imagery is that we allow this joy to permeate our lives, influencing how we interact with others and infusing our worship with exuberant gratitude.
- So how do we connect this joy to our story this morning?
- Giving the scriptural and traditional aspect of where our story contextually is coming from,

- Our story is a significant passage in the New Testament where Jesus asks his disciples about his identity and Peter confesses him as the Messiah, the Son of the living God.
- As I interact with this story, I am admittedly struck by Jesus boldness in asking the question, “Who do you Say I am?”, mainly because it put Jesus in a very vulnerable position if one were to really think about it.
- Mainly because Jesus’ reputation during this time was not full of rave reviews.
- For instance, many religious leaders of the time, particularly the Pharisees and Sadducees, viewed Jesus with suspicion and hostility.
- They were threatened by his teachings, which challenged their traditional interpretations of the law, not to mention Jesus’s growing popularity among the people was unsettling for them.

- They often engaged in theological debates with Jesus and sought ways to discredit him.
- The Roman authorities, represented by figures such as Pontius Pilate, were generally indifferent to Jesus at first.
- They saw him as just another Jewish preacher.
- However, as Jesus gained popularity and his movement attracted attention, the political authorities became more concerned about maintaining order.
- This eventually led to Jesus' trial and crucifixion, with Pilate succumbing to pressure from the Jewish religious leaders.
- Jesus was widely popular among the common people.
- Many were drawn to his teachings, miracles, and acts of compassion.
- Crowds followed him, seeking healing and guidance.

- The common people often saw Jesus as a prophet and a healer, and they were inspired by his message of love, forgiveness, and the Kingdom of God.
- I would be remiss if I did not name that not all Jewish leaders were hostile towards Jesus.
- Some, like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, showed interest in his teachings.
- Additionally, individuals from various backgrounds, such as Zacchaeus and the woman at the well, had positive encounters with Jesus.
- Nevertheless, why I took some time to paint this picture concerning Jesus' reputation, is to really highlight to us why this question of "Who do you say I am?" was such a bold and vulnerable question for him to ask.
- For the disciples I am certain were very aware of what others were saying about Jesus.

- Not to mention in the story just before our gospel today, the disciples would have just witnessed Jesus being confronted by the Pharisees and the Sadducees testing Jesus, demanding him to show them a sign from heaven that he was the Messiah.
- And Jesus replies to him, which I am inspired by in Matthew 16: 2 to these demands: “When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ ³ and in the morning, ‘Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.^[a] ⁴ A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah.” Jesus then left them and went away.
- Therefore, Church family, all of this and more was going on behind the scenes when Jesus asked the disciples this question, “Who Do you Say I am?”

- One can now potentially see why Jesus was filled with joy upon Simon Peter's response—"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."
- Although we know that Simon Peter would falter at some point down the line and deny Jesus three times,
- This does not negate the fact that it took a measure of faith and a measure of courage for Simon Peter to testify that Jesus is the Son of the living God," , especially with the reputation and toxicity that surrounded Jesus' leadership.
- **On Wednesday Night, applying the Sermon to life class, I asked the class, "How important is one's reputation?"**
- One of the youth of the class responded that this was a profound question, for sometimes one's reputation can get in the way and perhaps keep a person from growing if their reputation is not good.

- Others remarked that sometimes we tend to place people in a box; in other words, people tend to get confined by their reputation.
- Others acknowledge that we cannot completely control how others receive us or our message.
- Others remarked that perceptions are tricky, but ultimately, we cannot let other people's perceptions and expectations control us.
- All this and more leads us back to our story— to really invite us all to lean into what Jesus hopes to achieve through this question, “Who do you say I am?”
- Perhaps Jesus wanted to make sure that his disciples were really there for him and his mission, to ultimately give life to the fullness of all people.
(John 10:10)
- Perhaps the question was preparing the disciples for the ultimate fight leading to Jesus' crucifixion.

- Either way, as a leader and teacher of Jesus, I would like to plant this seed for our congregation to consider,
- This question of “Who do you say I am?” is one for us to keep exploring and unpacking, both individually and collectively, if we wish to embrace verse 18 of our gospel fully, which states, “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.”
- For me, to be this Rock (which is Peter’s name defined), I believe what Jesus is letting us also know is that **to be the Church**, we must be strong like an impenetrable Rock.
- In the radiant brilliance of our collective purpose, **we must stand** united, not merely as a congregation, **but as the living embodiment of the sacred covenant we call the Church.**

- **To be the Church**, we must be able to boldly proclaim that being the Church is not confined to the hallowed halls of worship; it is a dynamic force that pulsates through every heartbeat of our existence.
- **To be the Church for me** is the living, breathing manifestation of love—an unwavering force transcending creed, color, and circumstance.
- **To be the Church**, we must declare with resolute conviction that our faith is not a passive ritual but an active commitment to walk the talk of love.
- **To be the Church-** is a relentless pursuit to extend a compassionate hand to the broken, the marginalized, and the downtrodden.
- **To be the Church** means that our actions echo the divine melody of compassion and kindness.
- **To be the Church** -we must recognize that our faith, when lived authentically, becomes a

symphony of transformative love that reverberates far beyond the walls of our sanctuaries.

- It is not enough to profess our convictions; we are called to embody them.
- Our faith cannot be static; it must be dynamic, alive, and moving in the world.
- **To be the Church** means we are torchbearers of liberation, emancipators of the captive, and champions of justice.
- **To be the Church** means that we stand as a formidable force against the chains of oppression, prejudice, and despair.
- **To be the Church** means we pledge to free the captives, not through empty words, but through the tangible actions of love and solidarity.
- And so the prayer is that some of you out there, either in person or online listening to this sermon, that your soul is leaping on the inside proclaiming,

“I want to be this Church Kirstie...but I’m not sure how,”

- You may be saying to yourself, “I want to be this Church, but I’m not sure if I have what it takes;”
- Or I am not sure if I have the time,
- **Or I am just not sure....**
- And my response to you this morning is to start with a profession of your faith....
- Start with responding to the stirrings of your soul;
- That would declare to the world, “I love the Lord, for the Lord first loved me...”
- You see Church, some of you all know as I testify about my own faith for just a moment....I did not meet the Lord personally until I was roughly 25 years of age....

- I was unchurched,
- I was broke and broken,
- I was a victim and victimized,
- I was a divorced mother who didn't know how I was going to provide for my two baby girls at the time;
- I was bankrupt,
- I was evicted...
- I was thirsty and didn't know where my thirst could be quenched....
- Until one day, I met a man named Jesus at my own metaphorical well,
- Who told me he could give me some living water that would never have me thirst again...

- And my response to the Lord was... **yes I want some...**
- **I want to be free** from my depression,
- **I want to be free** from this heartbreak,
- **I want to be free** from this low self-esteem,
- **I want to be free** from my anger,
- So yes....**I want some...**
- Even though I'm scared Lord...**I want some...**
- Even though folks are talking about me...**I want some...**
- Even though I can't see what my future holds....**I want some...**

- And so it is because I took one step of faith into receiving all that Jesus had for me **that my life** began to make sense—
- **That my purpose** and call became more evident;
- **That my mission** and vision became apparent—
- Furthermore, I don't believe that I am loved any more than the next person;
- I believe this is how God works through each of us in our unique way and gifts, hoping that we all come together to form this impenetrable Rock built on the foundation of love.
- With the hope that our collective answer to the question of “Who Do You Say I Am?” is met with a resounding declaration, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

- In return, we will receive a joy that, thankfully, the world is not responsible for giving to us;
- Praise be to God, it is a joy that no one can away from us!

SERMON RESPONSE:

Let this candle be a sign of our deep and everlasting joy that we can be restored, our faith restored, our strength restored, our confidence restored, even our joy restored, as we watch and wait with all God's people for the promise to be fulfilled.