

# Who Do you Say Jesus is?

(Based on Matthew 16:13-20 and Lent 3)

Have you ever found yourself in Peter's position where you are asked your thoughts on the matter – not your friend's rant, your parent's belief, your barber's opinion, the nightly newscast expert's commentary. Your thought, your conviction, your answer to the question.

Maybe you have found yourself in the position where you are asked if your friend's new hairstyle is becoming, and you know she doesn't handle negative comments well. Or maybe your girlfriend and her mom are both dressed up for an evening out and you are put in a position to choose which one looks prettier? Or you are at a friend's home for dinner, and they serve you a new dish (which you know already is stretching your comfort limits) and they inquire, "Do you like it?" What will you say?

We all have been in situations like this. Some of us wade in boldly. Others of us make our way to the bathroom. Others of us ponder what will we say. For we realize our response will affirm or hurt, pick a side, or convey something differently than we intended. For example, No I don't like your overcooked roast beef will not win you over in the mother-in-law approval rating. And yet there we are -- people wishing to know what you think. Time for a bathroom break? 😊

This is the moment that Peter and the other disciples find themselves today. We listen in again...

"Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah,\* the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!"

Looks like Peter gave the right answer. Or at least the answer that the writer of Matthew's gospel wishes us to consider. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. What would this answer mean for Peter and the others? For us?

If Jesus is this Messiah, then we need to pay attention to who he is and what he does. By Peter's answer he needs to at least listen to who Jesus is. Peter's answer is offered to us as a way to consider how we might answer the same question – who is Jesus for us?

But before you answer, I wish to give you a couple of things to ponder. Peter who so bravely answers the question and for which he is so handsomely rewarded with a new name, a new set of keys, a special role in the church doesn't fully grasp what it means by saying Jesus is the Messiah. You see Peter has his own ideas of who the Messiah is.

If we had gone just a little further in our story today, we would hear Jesus calling Peter out. For Peter in one breath says you are the Messiah and in the next tells Jesus what type of Messiah he has to be. Not the one Jesus is telling him who will suffer and die. Peter says this doesn't not compute. My Messiah will be a powerful leader and kick out the Romans. My Messiah will fit

the ideas and the expectations people had for the Messiah. Peter may be able to proclaim Jesus as a Messiah, but he doesn't want to accept the one Jesus says he is.

Ah yes. Letting Jesus be Jesus.

This week I was reading a chapter from Brian McLaren's book, "Faith after doubt" (St. Martin's Essentials © 2021) He explores that in our faith lives we often have moments of growing and change occurring just as they do in our living. The first stage of faith is often the either/or level. Either you are good or bad. Either you are on God's side or against God. Our wording and judgements tend to be a simple dualism. Yes or no, good or bad, right or wrong. This level of our faith lives often is where many people of faith live out their faith for their entire lives. And yet, like many of us discover in our teens and early twenties there may be more to the equation than dualism. Sometimes there are expansion kits to the game of life. There is more than one way to understand people. I often use the term more gray and less black and white understanding. McLaren calls this level of faith complexity. There are more ways to engage the world. Jesus is telling Peter there is another way to view what a Messiah is like.

Peter has to wrestle with the complexity of Jesus' messiahship.

Don't we as well.

Interesting that this passage came up this week. For two weeks ago one of you wondered if heaven is a gated community. Gated – like the image of St. Peter at the pearly gates with his keys letting people in or keeping people out. Isn't this an image of heaven many of us have or at least have seen often enough in comic strips and cartoons. The gates keep some out and others in. Seems simple enough. Yet the same person asked do we really wish heaven to be a gated community? Does it fit with the notion of Jesus' loving the least? Does it reflect the stories of Jesus inviting all types of people to his banquet table? Was Jesus about choosing only some to love?

Well, no. But here we have Peter with keys. We begin to see that the answer is probably not a simple yes or no. It suddenly become more complex. Maybe the pearly gates are a poor image for heaven. But what are the keys for then?

Who do you say I am Jesus asks us?

Maybe Jesus has more to show us. Maybe our live with God is more about open gates, considering the line of those who are passing through freely. If Jesus the son of the living God is saying who is welcome, perhaps we need to consider who we are excluding. I would say a gated heavenly community is a poor image to the Jesus I proclaim as the Messiah.

Perhaps those keys were for something else – the chest to the forgiven sins locked away now. Maybe a sign that Peter understands more about Jesus than he knows at the moment. His life will offer moments to unlock more of that understanding like Peter did with knowing which foods were unclean and clean later in his life.

Sometimes what we proclaim once, grows into something more, is the second thing to consider as we hear Peter's affirmation of Jesus.

In the United Church we have grown in our understanding of who Jesus is too. We have over the years moved from just our 20 articles of faith in 1925 Basis of Union to include three other statements of faith that expand, refine, explain how we see God at work now. These reflections came from 1940, 1968 and 2006. The New Creed which we often use at a baptism service affirms, “We are called to be the Church...to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope...”

We have been able to embrace Peter’s yes, Jesus’ clarification, the wonder of Easter, and perhaps even the true keyholder. Over time we have found ourselves asking again and again who do you say Jesus is.

Is it little wonder then that Jesus is called friend, liberator, companion, healer, teacher, Saviour, the way, Lord, living presence, peace, the rock, light to name a few. Jesus is often more than one word can capture. So, we keep pondering who Jesus is.

Peter shouts out Messiah and then learns what Jesus’ messiah is.

We shout out...and then let the Spirit guide us to deeper waters of understanding, new paths of living, seeing the richness of Jesus in our lives.

Peter offers us a path to ponder today – who is Jesus for us?

*Sermon written by Rev. Bruce Dickson and delivered at Dublin Street United Church, Guelph, ON March 3, 2024. Permission is given for personal use or group study.*