

Reflection: Matthew 16:13-20

By David C. Hockett (with minor editing)

“Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15). Jesus puts the question directly to his disciples. After asking what the crowds say about him—the onlookers and “hangers-on”—Jesus directs the light on those closest to him. “Who do you say that I am?” It is a probing question that forces us to ask where we stand with this Jesus and how far we are willing to travel with him.

It is a question that gets to the heart of the matter. Who do we believe this Jesus to be? How we answer this question makes all the difference in the world. It does not change the reality of who Jesus is; rather, it shapes and defines who we will be. For our confession regarding Jesus shapes the way we live as church—as a community of disciples.

If we believe Jesus to be a wise teacher, then we may believe that discipleship or Christianity is merely a matter of our assent to a list of principles or propositions. If we believe Jesus to be a great moral example, then we will understand Christianity to be primarily about our adherence to a set of

ethics or ideals. But what if we really live and believe that Jesus, our companion and friend, is the Messiah, the Son of the living God? (Messiah: fulfilling promise and expectation)

The words we find in 16:17-19 are unique to the Gospel of Matthew. Only Matthew links Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God, with the church. In fact, this is one of only two occurrences of the word church in the Gospels. So for Matthew, the church, the community of Jesus' followers, is somehow related to the confession that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Jesus puts the question to his disciples—the church, the ecclesia, the gathered community—asking them where they stand, who they are, and how they will live. In reporting their response in this way, Matthew is suggesting that the church is a body of believers that is grounded upon and lives out Peter's confession.

Church is the community of the Messiah, the fellowship of the Son of the living God. It is not a social club, a religious institution, a moral society, or a building. Church is a people

whose life together is defined by the [hope] of God manifest in Jesus the Messiah and Son.

But affirming this about Jesus does not mean that we fully understand the implications of such a confession. Saying the right things does not always equate to living them out.

We can say the right words about Jesus and still not know their full implication for our lives. The disciples certainly did not appreciate fully what such a confession might mean. Peter himself would discover that saying the words, uttering the confession, as important a first step as that might be, is not the same thing as living the words or embodying them in the life of the kingdom. Following Jesus is a holy adventure, and it often left the disciples dazed and confused as the hard road of discipleship opened before them. It is a way of life that demands active faith, not just belief. As Peter would discover, discipleship means that one day we might be led to places we'd rather not go.

Faith is not the absence of doubt. Faith is our daily, prayerful struggle with God in which we learn the full implications of being the church, of being a people whose life

together is shaped by the confession, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (16:16).

This can be a difficult journey. Being friends with Jesus is not easy; the way this confession leads is costly and demanding. But it is also a great gift; the way of Jesus leads to full and abundant life.

In asking “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus invites the disciples, the church, into relationship, to walk with him the often hard and demanding road of discipleship. Through this question, Jesus invites us to let go of our attachment to all the other “lords” that demand our allegiance— ideas, ambitions, and relationships—and to become friends with him.

In making this confession we are saying that we want our lives, our witness, and our ministry to be defined by Christ’s life, witness, and ministry.

We are often guilty of projecting our own ideas about the nature of discipleship onto Jesus, shaping our confession rather than letting it shape and give content to our life as church. That is because Jesus says things we don’t want to hear about the nature of his messiahship and the character of those who would

be his friends: “Go sell your possessions”; [] or “Deny yourself.”

As we come to understand who this Jesus is, we may believe that embodying Peter’s confession is frankly impossible. And it is, unless we also acknowledge that we are never alone. Christ walks the way before us and alongside us. Christ is our constant companion. Just as he did with Peter, Christ continues to come to us, to dwell with the church, pulling, prodding, guiding, nudging, calling, and being with us.

“Who do you say that I am?” This is the heart of the matter for us as the church. How we answer this question, with our lips and with our lives, defines the shape of our life together. We make this confession, not by heroic acts of will, but by grace, by a transforming relationship with the God who has come to us in the flesh, who walked the way before us, and who joins us on the road even now.

This confession is not our possession; it is not the result of our cleverness or the fruit of our brilliant deduction. It is a blessing to be able to say, and even more to live, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” It is a gracious and costly

gift. It will determine everything about us; it demands all our heart, mind, body, and soul. It leads to the cross and to giving ourselves sacrificially for God and for neighbor. But it is also the way that leads to life.

Let us pray...

**O God,
you blessed Abraham and Sarah,
and made them a great nation.**

**Keep us in remembrance
of the rock from which we are hewn,
that the waste places of our lives
may blossom to your glory. Amen.**