

Sunday, August 24, 2008  
Matt. 16:15-20  
Rom. 12:1-8

## WHO IS HE. . . WHO ARE WE?

This is one of those Gospel lessons that is so rich it's hard to settle on one theme. Plus, the passage from Paul's letter to the Romans is one of his most insightful and encouraging in all of Scripture. And then we've got the birth of Moses and the rebellious mid-wives. All in one day. What could be better. So, just settle in while I spend the rest of the day standing up here proclaiming the Word. It's great stuff.

OK, maybe not. We'll have to limit ourselves to a few high points.

First, St. Peter at the Pearly Gates jokes. When I was in undergraduate school—way back in the dark ages of the 1970s, someone said the best thing to do any time you are speaking publicly is to tell a joke. Audiences will pay attention to a joke and they'll think you're a nice person. Well, even then I thought that was manipulative and cheap and I've never done it.

But this passage does sort of scream out for it. Everyone knows a St. Peter at the Pearly Gates joke. I know that every one of you is sitting there thinking of one or more. Well, we are not going to spend our Worship time telling Peter at the Pearly Gates jokes and since it's not going to be comedy central open mike time, I won't do it either.

It's fascinating that the image of people having to stop at the gates of heaven and be examined by St. Peter is such a mainstay of our culture. And it all comes from this little passage in Matthew.

Jesus is talking to Peter and he says:

*<sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

This passage also was the source of centuries of debate between Catholics, Protestants and Eastern Orthodox religions relating to the scope of this commissioning of Peter. For today, you're going to have to take my word for it that that debate is one that has largely been resolved to the satisfaction of scholars in all three camps and we have got to move on.

This is a pivotal passage in Matthew's Gospel. It's not the first time that anyone has recognized Jesus as the Son of God, but it is the first time that it happens in a thoughtful way as opposed to in response to some extraordinary event like a couple of weeks ago when Jesus walked across the Sea of Galilee and climbed into the boat with a bunch of quivering disciples.

In today's story, Jesus has just had a run in with the Pharisees and Sadducees. He got annoyed with them because they wanted a sign, like he hadn't given them enough signs already. So, there seems to be a shift in Jesus' demeanor. And they have moved off the beaten path for a little while and Jesus wants the disciples to tell him what other people are saying about him.

Think how he's feeling, he's walked on water, fed thousands of people with a couple loaves of bread and some fish, he's cured people of blindness and all kinds of illnesses. Cast out demons. All of that and the community leaders come up to him and say "well show us a sign from heaven." What are they thinking?

So, the disciples give him some words of encouragement. Some people say you are John the Baptist, some say Elijah and still others say Jeremiah.

Have you ever had someone say to you: Well, I believe Jesus was a great prophet, but I just can't buy into that Son of God stuff. They are trying to be congenial, but really, they are being condescending. I know because I used to be one of those people.

Remember, that the disciples are telling Jesus what other people are saying. And they are not comparing him to any ordinary prophet. There were lots of prophets, but there is special significance to each of the three named here. Essentially, they are identifying Jesus as a prophet whom God has raised from the dead.

So, Jesus may be feeling a little more reassured about his ministry. Maybe he has been more effective than he thought. But he's thinking you guys have witnessed everything I've done and you've heard everything I've said. Do you get it? Because there have certainly been some clues that you don't. Like freaking out when I was asleep in the boat with you and like worrying about not having food with you after we thousands. So, he asks the disciples "Who do you say I am?"

He put the question to all of them and Peter's answer is on behalf of all of them. It's important to remember that here, Peter is the spokesperson. The leader to be sure, but he is answering for all of them.

*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."*

It seems so obvious to those of us who know the whole story, but think about it. What would you say to Jesus? What do you say to him? Who is he?

Peter's answer is actually extraordinary. He is saying, in effect, we understand that you are of God and you have come to save us.

Because he is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, he is the one who can restore our relationship with the Creator. He restores the covenant

in spite of our consistent failure to keep it. And, here is another important thing to remember: They didn't figure it out because they are so smart. Even with all their experiences of seeing and hearing this man Jesus, they could not have known the significance of his presence without the revealing grace of God.

It's why I love the song Prince of Peace. It's like we are standing in the shoes of those first disciples trying to answer the question.

He is Lord of Lords, the Alpha and Omega, the Great I Am. The Prince of Peace. The Messiah, the Son of the Living God. We know it because he is God revealed to us not because we are so smart that we figured it out.

And Jesus is so relieved. It's the whole purpose of everything he went through. Walking on the earth, dying and rising, all so we can know who he is—so that we can see the face of God.

And you know how it is whenever you are trying to teach someone something and you see the light go on in their eyes. I know all of you teachers and parents know that feeling. Watching an infant figure out how to put the square peg in the square hole, a three year old tie his shoes for the first time, a bunch of six year olds struggling to make of letters into words and then seeing their faces when they get it that this is reading.

That's how Jesus must have felt. He's thinking they get it, halleluiah. Don't stop there, lets seize the moment. Let's get you going –now that you get it. Now that you know who I am, I am going to tell you who you are.

You are the church. You are the purveyors of my message. You are the conduits for my Spirit-for the very Spirit of God, and so you are the holders of the keys to heaven. And because of that, even though there will be

hard times and conflicts and attacks on us—attacks on us for who we are—not even the gates of hades will prevail against us.

Those are reassuring words especially in these times when we are seeing the loss of church membership in most of the Western World. But Jesus knew what he was talking about.

In the last 10 years or so, the Chinese government has loosened up just a little on the absolute suppression of religion that has been the norm since the communist party first gained control of the government in 1949. It turns out that even in that country that officially is atheist, and where Christians had always been a very small minority, secret house churches flourished and the church actually grew in population.

The gates of hades will not prevail against it.

It's good news, but it doesn't mean we don't have any responsibility for the church.

This passage is nothing less than a commissioning. Most of us are familiar with the "great commission when Jesus says at the close of the Gospel of Matthew

**Matthew 28:** <sup>18</sup> "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup> and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

Our passage today is the same kind of commissioning, but it's the commissioning of the church. The Greek word used by the writer of Matthew here for church is Ekklesian and it means literally the Assembly. The Assembly, in Ancient Greek was made up of those who were called out to govern.

So, Jesus is calling out the disciples to be his Church. And he is giving them—giving us—the authority and the responsibility to carry out the work of the Kingdom of Heaven. That is what a commissioning is.

So, we know who Jesus is—he is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God. And now we know who we are. We are those called out by him to be his church.

Each of us is called to that membership in the Assembly. And as Paul explained to the Romans, each of us has our own distinct gifts to offer in carrying out our calling.

We love being reminded of that—sometimes we need to be reminded of it when we let the secular culture’s definition of success influence our self-image. We can and should take comfort in remembering that by God’s grace we are all gifted.

And when we take that comfort, we also need to remember that God gave us those gifts for a reason—to use them for his kingdom here on earth.

Sometimes that means taking a path that is contrary to the cultural definition of success. Paul says:

*<sup>2</sup> Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—*

The church, the ekklesia, that Jesus commissioned is not about a building where people gather inside to reaffirm each other that they are doing the right thing. The church is the assembly of God’s chosen people. We are chosen to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, and that means taking us outside of our comfort zone and outside of the walls of this building.

Don’t anyone think I’m saying don’t come to church. It is not an either/or proposition. It is both. If we are going to claim our membership in

the body of Christ we also claim our membership in the church which means gathering as the Assembly to worship and it means using our special gifts to call out others as well.