

Matthew 16:13-20

¹³When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

¹⁴They said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

¹⁵He said to them, “But you, who do you say that I am?”

¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

¹⁷Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overpower it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰Then he commanded the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

Who Is Jesus?

I.

It’s that time again. It’s time for opinion polls. It’s a big election year for House and Senate races, and for the governor of our state. People will be asked their opinions about which candidate is better for this or that position; which one understands the issues the best, and which has the best plans to address those issues. You have already heard who is in the lead in this race or that, despite the fact that no ballots have yet been cast in the general election.

Methods for opinion polls have changed. Microphones might still be thrust into the face to ask a person’s opinion. Phone calls have been popular since phones were invented, though fewer and fewer people will pick up or respond. Push polls might ask your opinions via texted questions or a form on a web page. Or even the newest polls: prediction market platforms like Polymarket and Kalshi where you can essentially bet on the outcome of nearly anything.

Though the methods have changed, opinion polls are nothing new. Jesus even used them in today’s Gospel. “Jesus... asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say the Son of Man is?’” (Matthew 16:13, EHV).

These days a question about who Jesus is will get a variety of answers. Lots of people will admit that Jesus is an historical figure. He was a great teacher, perhaps even a prophet. Jesus, many will admit, was ahead of his time; he’s someone worth learning from, even if you don’t believe all the things that have been written about his miracles. Most will even say he is a great example; they might even use the question: “What would Jesus do?” to help guide their lives.

“Who do people say the Son of Man is?” The opinion poll about Jesus from 2,000 years ago is remarkably similar to that of today. “They said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets’” (Matthew 16:14, EHV). Those were all great men: prophets who spoke for God, people who suffered for the truth, people who prepared the way. The people weren’t trying to be disrespectful about Jesus—they ranked him among the greatest men who had ever lived.

But that’s the problem. A great man is not what we need. A respected and well-known teacher cannot save you. A great example is not going to help you, so the question “What would Jesus do?” is a question that leaves you lacking. “What would Jesus do?” can lead you to despair, because *you* can’t imitate Jesus; you could never hope to live up to his example.

The people the disciples quoted stopped at all the wrong answers, just as so many do today. Those nameless, faceless people saw Jesus as a great teacher and a great example. “What would Jesus do?” They never got around to asking the better question: “What *did* Jesus do for me?”

Jesus knew he could make his point by asking the same polling question of a different group. He stopped asking about the people and turned to his disciples. “He said to them, ‘But you, who do you say that I am?’” (Matthew 16:15, EHV).

Jesus wasn't asking about all the years they had spent in careful research to discover who he was. He wanted to get a snap poll. What did they think right that moment, right now, today.

Are you ready to answer that question when you walk out the church doors today and someone asks you: "Who is Jesus?"

II.

One disciple immediately stepped forward to serve as the spokesman for the group. "Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'" (Matthew 16:16, EHV). Not a great man. Not a prophet in a long line of great prophets, from Old Testament right down to John the Baptist. The Christ. Some translations say the Messiah, since they know Matthew was writing primarily for people of Jewish descent. Christ is Greek word for the Messiah, who had been promised by God since Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

The odds on Polymarket and Kalshi didn't prompt Peter to come up with this answer. The opinions of the crowds that followed Jesus around didn't bring Peter to this answer, either. It wasn't even Peter's sharp theological insight that led him to this conclusion.

"Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven'" (Matthew 16:17, EHV). Flesh and blood didn't get Peter to the right answer. Following Jesus around for a couple of years didn't lead him to this conclusion. Watching Jesus heal the sick and listening to him teach didn't even bring about a logical conclusion. No, Jesus says, "My Father who is in heaven is the One who revealed it to you."

We saw the same thing in the First Reading for today. Moses was up on the top of Mt. Sinai. "The LORD came down in the cloud. He took his stand there with Moses and proclaimed the name of the LORD. 'The LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed: 'The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and overflowing with mercy and truth'" (Exodus 34:5-6, EHV). Moses didn't discover who God is by piecing together clues. He didn't study God carefully, or reason his way to a conclusion. God spoke it to him.

It's the same pattern as what we see in Peter in today's Gospel. God himself must show us who he is, or we're left guessing along with everyone else answering opinion polls about Jesus.

Who is Jesus? "Who is the Son of Man," as Jesus himself asked the question. Over and over Jesus had called himself "The Son of Man." He had identified himself as humble and human. He identified himself as One of us.

He *had* to be. Paul said to the Galatians: "God sent his Son to be born of a woman, so that he would be born under the law, ⁵in order to redeem those under the law" (Galatians 4:4-5, EHV). The only way God's promised Messiah could stand in our place was to be born under the law.

But a true man alone could not satisfy God's perfect justice for the whole world. "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16, EHV). Paying for the sins of all people could only be accomplished by God himself.

III.

The most important reality to know is that the One who called himself "The Son of Man" is also "The Son of God," as Peter identified him. He is both. Jesus is 100% true man, "truly human" as we say in the Nicene Creed on Communion Sundays. He is also 100% true God, "eternally begotten from the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father," as we also say in the Nicene Creed.

In fact, the church has always insisted on stating this doctrine, this teaching, very precisely. That's why we use the Athanasian Creed on Trinity Sunday, even though it is wordy. Pull out your hymnal sometime at home and read it closely. It's on pages 284-285 in this current hymnal. If you have the old burgundy Christian Worship at home, you'll find it on pages 132-133. The Athanasian Creed relentlessly and carefully spells out what Peter confessed in one sentence: Jesus Christ is God and Man—two natures in one person, not confused, not divided.

As the Athanasian Creed concludes at the end of the lengthy confession: "Whoever does not faithfully and firmly believe this cannot be saved." The moment you soften this fundamental

teaching of Christianity even slightly, you no longer have the Christ. You have just another entry in the opinion poll.

Paul says the same thing in today's Second Reading: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9, EHV). In case someone thinks this confession is something we come up with ourselves, Paul says the same thing Jesus said to Peter: "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (Romans 10:8, EHV). It's placed there. It's given, not achieved.

The Gospel for today concludes: "Then he commanded the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ" (Matthew 16:20, EHV). The disciples were not to talk about this just yet.

The verse *after* the reading shows us why: "From that time, Jesus began to show his disciples that he had to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things... and be killed, and on the third day be raised again" (Matthew 16:21, EHV). The confession wasn't the end of the story. The Son of Man and the Son of God had to proceed with the Heavenly Father's plan. He had to suffer and die for the sins of all.

IV.

So what do you *do* with the confession Peter made: "You are the Christ"? Jesus didn't leave Peter's confession as a private opinion. He built something on it. He said: "I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overpower it" (Matthew 16:18, EHV). The rock Jesus says he will build his church on is *not* Peter. Peter found it easy to confess who Jesus really is before a friendly audience of close disciples. Just a few days later, with a less friendly audience, Peter would deny knowing Jesus at all.

The rock is Peter's confession—the confession that Jesus is the Christ. To that Church, on that unshakable foundation, Jesus hands real authority: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19, EHV). That's Jesus' gift to his whole church; he makes that clear two chapters later when he speaks again of the keys of the kingdom and says: "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18, EHV). Jesus made sure to use the plural "you" so there could be no question that the power to forgive sins in Jesus' name was given to the whole church.

That means that when a person is crushed with guilt, sure that God could never and would never forgive them, you have the authority to say: "your sins are forgiven in Jesus."

To the friend who insists that sin isn't really sin, you have the authority to say that they stand in danger of spending eternity in hell because of their unbelief if they do not repent.

To your children, to your spouse, to your own weary conscience—you have a confession to speak out loud, not just hold it in your heart privately.

The church that has been handed this confession doesn't hoard it, we *speak* it.

As for Peter, if he was left to himself he was only one more voice in the opinion pole. It took the Father's word, spoken to him, to settle the question forever. It happens to you every time this confession is placed in your mouth again.

Who is Jesus? He was given for you and confessed by you. The Son of Man is God. He said so himself, and the Father confirmed it. On that word—not on you, not on me—his church still stands. Amen.