

SERMON Upon This Rock Matthew 16: 13-20

Today's story from the gospel of Matthew brought back sweaty palm memories of being in high school history class. **SLIDE** The teacher tended to ask two kinds of questions. Fact questions were the easy kind- what year did Columbus discover America? And we all could say the rhyme: In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue. **SLIDE** But then there were meaning questions that made your palms sweat. Especially when you didn't read the assigned reading and the teacher asked how some detail about the Revolutionary War affects how you think about America. And you realize you don't have any answer at all.

So what do you do? You look down at your text book, you shuffle papers, or intently write something on your notes, anything to avoid catching the teacher's eye so he won't call on you. And you hoped one of those other students who **did** read the assignment would raise their hand. Did anyone ever pray in class, "Please don't let him call on me. Please..." Is that how the disciples felt in today's story?

SLIDE Jesus had been with the disciples for quite some time. They had watched him heal the lame, watched him feed a crowd of 5000 hungry people, had seen him walk on water, had seen him argue with the Pharisees, and heard him teach about the kingdom of God until the gospel of Mark tells us "the people were amazed."

SLIDE Jesus decided to take a poll. We know all about polls today. There is a poll of some kind on the news everyday about what people are thinking. As we head into the election campaign season, there will be even more. Jesus was way ahead of his time with his poll, "Who do people say I am?" "What are people saying about me?"

It wasn't a hard question. All his disciples had to do was say what other people were saying. And it appears people were talking, because they listed off John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets. Each person they named represented a time when God's power was active on behalf of his people. John's preaching and baptizing had prepared the people for the coming of Jesus. Elijah was a miracle worker and preacher, Jeremiah and the other prophets delivered God's word of challenge and encouragement in difficult times. You can hear the people's hope about Jesus. They could see that Jesus was not just another rabbi. Maybe Jesus would be the one to bring real change. Like when someone says today, "Where's our Martin Luther King, Jr. when we need him?"

SLIDE But then Jesus asked that other kind of question. Not just a fact question- what are people saying- but, "Who do YOU say that I am? And there

was silence. Me say what I believe? It was safer to report what others believed. Don't we stumble trying to put into words what we believe about Jesus and why he is so important to us? If a visitor today were to ask us who Jesus is, what would we say?

SLIDE Which makes what Peter said even more remarkable. Because in that moment, Peter combined all he knew about Jesus with what he thought he knew about the promised Christ, or Messiah. The prophets had promised hundreds of years earlier that God's Messiah, God's Anointed One would come and establish God's kingdom. The Messiah would rule in righteousness so people expected the Messiah to be a powerful king like King David who would conquer the Romans and kick them out. The promised land would be theirs again and they would be at peace. Isaiah had prophesied that God's anointed one would give sight to the blind and make the lame walk again. And everyone knew about Jesus' power to do miraculous things- to calm the winds and the waves, power over demons, and to heal illness? Next Sunday on Palm Sunday, we will see the crowds excitedly welcome Jesus as their Messiah, the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We shouldn't be surprised that Peter saw Jesus as Messiah. Yet, Peter recognized more in Jesus than an earthly king, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!" He recognized something only the Spirit of God can reveal to a person- that Jesus is the Son of God in human flesh. God with us. He couldn't reason his way to understanding that Jesus was the Son of God. And neither can we. Recognizing Jesus as more than one of many religious teachers, prophets, or miracle workers comes by the Spirit of God.

SLIDE Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, and the Son of the Living God was so important that Jesus said he will build his church upon this confession by Peter and all others who confess Jesus. Jesus did a little play on words with the word rock. Up to this point, Peter had been called by his birth name- Simon. But here Jesus gave Simon a new name, Peter, which means stone. "You are Peter, or you are stone, and upon this rock, different word, on this solid foundation of confession in me, I will build my church.

The Greek word translated church is ekklesia. It means an assembly of people called out for a purpose. So a group of people gathered for a political debate is an ekklesia. The church is Jesus' "called out ones" who gather together for the purpose of following Jesus and spreading the good news about him. Jesus began gathering his called out ones" as he called Peter and the other first disciples to

“Come, follow me,” and they left their fishing boats, tax collector booths, and homes and followed Jesus wherever he went.

The church’s glue is our confession, our deep belief, that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Not that we’re Baptists or Methodists, or that we enjoy being together although that is true. It’s not that we share a common heritage or race, or that we live in the same city, or even that we all love the wonderful pastor and musicians and programs of the church. The glue that connects us and the strength that drives our purpose as a church is our rock-solid belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Lord, the Son of God. Everything the church does comes from this foundation. It’s to be why we meet on Sundays- to worship the Lord and invite others to know Christ too; it’s to be why we give- to thank the Lord and support his work on earth. It’s to be why we care for people- the homeless here and even in Paradise, California- because Jesus cares for the homeless and the suffering and we are trying to be like Jesus. It’s to be why we gather to fellowship - not just to be social, but to strengthen one another’s faith, bear one another’s burdens, and celebrate each other’s blessings.

Sometimes churches get sidetracked about why they exist- their purpose becomes to get together with the people they love, to enjoy doing the things they’ve always enjoyed doing, to sing familiar songs and hear a nice sermon that peps them up for another week, and feeling comfortable takes precedence. Churches can lose sight of the fact that growing in faith is an adventure that is seldom comfortable, and that reaching out to make disciples always brings change. And over time, what connects them is their history instead of their confession of the living Christ, and sadly, they find themselves declining. Every year 4000 churches in America close their doors because they have lost their purpose to grow in faith and to make disciples. But the ekklesia Jesus is building gets its vitality and purpose, gets its very life, from its deep confession about Jesus, and even the gates of hell cannot stand against it. Where does this church get its life? Who do YOU say Jesus is?

SLIDE I found it challenging last week to give my own clear answer to Jesus’ question, “Who do **you** say that I am?” Everything I came up with sounded like something you can read in a textbook- factual, but impersonal. I like what Pastor Dave Lose wrote. *I think Jesus is God’s way of showing us how much God loves us and all people. God is so big that I think we have a hard time connecting with God. And so God came to live like one of us, in order to reveal God. Jesus revealed God’s heart, a heart that aches with all who suffer a heart that is upset and angry when*

injustice occurs, a heart that grieves when we lose something precious to us, a heart that loves us like a loving parent and so not only wants the best for us but is always eager to welcome us home in grace, forgiveness, and love.

I think Jesus also came to show us what's possible. Rather than give in to disease, Jesus healed. Rather than surrender people to demons, Jesus showed compassion. Rather than let people starve, Jesus fed people who were hungry. Jesus refused to be satisfied or limited by the status quo and invites us to do the same, because if Jesus' life and death show us how much God loves us, Jesus' resurrection shows us that God's love is more powerful than hate, fear, and even death. Jesus shows us, in short, that God's love wins.

What does this mean to how we live our lives? It means that we try to live our lives sharing God's love and forgiveness with others. It means we let God's love and power guide our decisions, not just our best thinking. It means we can be open to new ideas and ways of being because God's love guides us there for the sake of others. It also means that on our most discouraged days, we choose to trust in God's power to bring resurrection and life out of brokenness. Because if Jesus is Lord, if Jesus is the Christ, if Jesus is truly Son of God with us, then there is nothing that can stop his power.

SLIDE Friends, we have an opportunity today to be counted with those who confess Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God. To confess with our lips and confess with the way we live.

I invite you to take out your stone. It doesn't look very impressive. There have been some pretty impressive stones in church history- Apostle Peter, Apostle Paul, Apostle Junia, Barnabus, Luke, Mary, Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Adoniram Judson, Mother Teresa, Billy Graham, and so many more. But Jesus is saying to each of us this morning as he did to Peter, "You are my stone too, and upon your confession of who I am, I am still building my church." As we sing, I invite you to bring your stone and place it around the cross as a testimony that you join all the other stones that Jesus has used to build his church so far because he's not done and we have the privilege of being a part of what Jesus is still doing.

COMMUNION 4-7-19

SLIDE As servers come forward

SLIDE Have you been in a restaurant for dinner lately and seen people sitting around their tables, with their eyes on their cell phones, not talking? Even when the food arrives, it's like they're eating separately at the same table.

SLIDE In I Corinthians 10: 17, Paul described something different about how we eat at this table:

“Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.”

This a table where the body of Christ eats and remembers **together**. At this table our hearts are joined and we serve one another, pray for one another, and wait for one another. We could finish this much faster if we wanted to. In fact, we could pass these out and you could take your communion to go. But efficiency isn't the point; being one is. We gather at this table as members of one body, tied together by our common confession of Jesus as Lord.

SLIDE So, as one body, I invite us to do something different today. Instead of keeping our eyes down and being silent as the bread and cup are passed, I invite us to look around at our brothers and sisters, and as we pass the trays to one another, look each other in the eye and say, “This is Christ's body broken for you.” And “This is Christ's blood shed for you.”

Jesus said that this bread is his body broken for us.

This cup is Christ's blood shed for us.

As often as we eat this bread and drink this cup, we remember the Lord's death together until he comes. Body of Christ, let's join hands and sing together.

SLIDE **Blest be the Tie that Binds**