

Did you ever have one of those moments in your life, when ‘the stars came into alignment –Jupiter was aligned with Mars,’ the clouds rolled away, and you were hit as if by a bolt of lightning, and you exclaimed, “Aha! That’s the answer! By Joe, I’ve got it. That’s the ticket. Eureka! I have found it! “Watson, come here!”

Actually, it happens to me more and more every day, only now it is when I find where I laid down my phone, or I remember why I went to the kitchen, or I get in the truck and remember where am I going or what I was going to the store to buy. And honestly some of my aha moments come after I have been to the store and as I am driving home realize that I forgot to get what I went to the store in the first place!

Today’s passage is one of those aha moments for Peter.

Matthew 16:13-20

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

“But you, who do you say that I am?”

In the first question Jesus is asking what the disciples hear and see around them. In the second question he wants to know what they see and hear within themselves. Jesus is always pushing us to go deeper, to look within and discover who or what our life is centered on, and then to re-center. But we are followers of Christ. Isn’t he already our center? Maybe so, but the life of discipleship is one of continual re-centering.

“But who do you say that I am?” I wonder sometimes if we hear this question as Jesus’ mid-gospel exam. We are about halfway through Matthew’s account of the gospel. So, it makes sense that Jesus might gather the guys and say, “Ok let’s see what you’ve learned, if you really understand. Who am I?”

Peter’s historic confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi stands as one of the great Christological affirmations in the Gospels. “But who do you say that I am?” Peter is somehow able to respond, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Most of us know the right answer. We’ve read Peter’s answer. Today’s gospel is not, however, about giving the right answer. This is not a test. This is not about what is in our head but what is in our heart. It’s about what lies at the core of our existence. Jesus is asking the disciples to consider what centers their lives. What is the axis about which their world turns? It is not enough to just give the right answer. They are to become and reveal the answer by their lives, words, and actions. Those things, for Jesus, are foundational to a life of discipleship.

Peter's flash of insight may be compared with other moments in the Gospels when there are early glimpses—deeper than reverent addresses of “Lord,” “Teacher,” or even “Son of David.”

- “I know who you are, the Holy One of God” (a disruptive man with an unclean spirit)
- “You are the Son of God!” (demons shouting as they come out of many afflicted persons)
- “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John the Baptist saying more than he really knows)
- “We know that this is truly the Savior of the world” (Samaritan villagers after being introduced to Jesus by the woman at the well)
- “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Roman soldier at the cross)

Many of us were nervous when our children were first given keys to drive a vehicle capable of going 100 mph at the age of sixteen. Do they have the maturity to handle such responsibility?

We might ask the same about Jesus' giving Peter the keys of the kingdom. If we look at Peter's track record prior to and after this event, could we claim that he has the maturity of even a sixteen-year-old? He is constantly missing the point and often talks before he thinks.

How does one give the keys to the kingdom of heaven and build the church upon someone so unstable? Clearly Peter's authority is not based on his rightness or righteousness. Then what is its basis?

Back at the beginning of this passage, Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is? Their response seems to depend on what particular faction they are a part of—whether they are partial to John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or another prophet. In the Protestant church today, people might respond by interpreting Jesus through the lens of Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Barth, or Billy Graham. The tendency, in other words, is for people to project onto Jesus their particular cultural, theological, and denominational allegiances.

The Church, which is born in some ways in this passage, is not a human achievement. It is not meant to be a fellowship of persons who gather as a support group because they share common beliefs. The Church, representing the foundation built by Christ on disciples like Simon Peter, is meant to be a vehicle through which God gives us revelation into the truth about God, blesses those who receive the

revelation with joy, gives us new identities in Christ Jesus, and then sends us forth to continue the work of establishing the Reign of God on earth as it is in Heaven.

In the next verse, however, Jesus responds by making the question to his disciples more personal: “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter, as he often does, speaks first and replies, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus responds, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter (Petros), and on this rock (petra) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”

Simon first could have earned the nickname due to his unpredictable character or rocky hardheadedness, but with this Christological confession, Jesus tells him it has new significance, that now he is going to live up to the highest meaning of “Peter.” He becomes a rock upon which God will place other stones as, over time, Christ builds a people for himself.

By the sound of it, Peter got a serious promotion; if there was any doubt about his supremacy among the other disciples, surely this cleared it up! Notice, however, that Jesus was responding not to Peter’s particular strengths and accomplishments as a disciple (which left much to be desired) but to his testimony. The rock is not Peter the person, but Peter’s testimony.

Jesus makes this a teaching moment to explain that such theological understanding is not the product of human reasoning (“flesh and blood has not revealed this to you”) but it is the gift of “my Father in Heaven”.

1 Peter picks up the image, as Christ is called “a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God’s sight.” Now we are called to be like Jesus himself and like Peter and others down the generations who have confessed Jesus as Son of God and Savior. “Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house” (1Peter 2:5).

The question I throw out to us is: how are we letting ourselves be built into a spiritual house? Through Bible study, LOGOS, and Sunday school opportunities, we have the means to be built up and for us to be a strong spiritual house; we need to make sure that we are being built up personally so that we can build up together as the body of Christ. In other words, we are the living stones being placed upon the rock.

This is the rock on which the church is founded and the source of the Christian’s authority. This is what grants us the keys of the kingdom of heaven, to bind and to lose on earth. God relates to the church not as an intimidating ruler but as a loving

parent who entrusts to a fragile and immature child the power to do right and to do wrong, to be faithful and to drift away.

The history of Christianity, of course, attests to how vulnerable we are to complacency as Christians, and how easy it is for us to slip into idolatry by resting on someone else's confession of Christ. This passage calls us to move beyond our particular political and denominational factions, our various theological emphases, and our respective ethnic loyalties by speaking truthfully to one another in and through our differences about the impact of Jesus Christ in our own lives. And considering all that is going on in the world, this is more important than ever before.

As the apostle Paul understood, it is in our weakness that Christ's strength is made apparent. We become not only individual testifiers within a community, but a community that testifies to the living gospel of Jesus Christ.

Considering Christ's promise to build His church, we can be assured that if Christ has not yet returned, then it's because He's still building! He is still saving, and sanctifying, and gathering, and assembling His people. And so, we can go about the work and business of the kingdom always with hope, and confidence, and joy, knowing that there is never any reason for dismay or despair.

Jesus' question to each of us is, "Who do you say that I am? What is your testimony of me? What is your experience of the living God through my witness and presence?" And your answer is...