

“Confession of Faith”

Matthew 16:13-20

August 23, 2020

I think the month of August is a time when many people have a lot of questions, but the questions this year are different than any previous year in our history. Normally parents, teachers, and students are asking questions such as, “How am I going to pick up my children from two different schools, get them to their after school activities on time, and be able to fix dinner? Will parents be able to provide my classroom with all of the supplies I need? I wonder how many of my friends will be in my class or classes this fall?” Instead, this year parents, teachers, and students are asking, “Will my children be able to focus on their school work at home during the day while I am at work? Will my students be able to adapt to online learning? Will there be any extra-curricular activities at school this year?”

As the month of August comes to an end, it often marks the end of summer and as we prepare for the fall season many times we may find ourselves re-evaluating some things in our lives by asking questions like: “Should I consider getting a new car before the end of the year., I don’t know if my car will make it much longer or if it’s worth repairing? Now that the children are out of college and have moved out of the house, maybe we should consider downsizing? Are we prepared for retirement? Should we consider switching to a new health care plan? Do you think this pandemic will be over by the end of the year?”

I think the classic Abbott and Costello routine, “Who’s On First?” may describe the feeling that many of us experience as we try to answer these questions. In that famous routine, Abbot knows that the names of some of the confusing ball players are “Who,” “What,” and “I Don’t Know.” But the completely confused Costello, not aware of these odd names, is absolutely lost. Abbot tells him, “On our team, Who’s on first, What’s on second, and I Don’t Know is on third;” but poor Costello doesn’t know what in the world is going on. The more questions he asked, the more confused he became.

Our world today is a confusing place and there are many questions our society is struggling to answer. What will happen if this person or that person wins the election? How long will it take to create a vaccine for Covid-19? Will racism ever end in our country? As confusing as our world may be, perhaps it is no more confusing than it was in the days when Jesus lived on this earth.

As Jesus traveled to many different areas, teaching people, healing others, and performing miracles, He pulled His disciples together in our Gospel lesson and asked them, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” “Some say you are John the Baptist,” replied the disciples. Obviously many followers of Jesus had heard of John. The fact that he was beheaded by Herod had certainly gotten around, but here was another man who preached a message very similar to John’s, so in their mind Jesus must be John the Baptist brought back from the dead. Even King Herod, as reported in the Gospel of Mark, expressed this view. But Jesus was not John.

“Others say you are Elijah,” explained the disciples. It was the belief in those days that God would send the prophet Elijah back to Israel to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. This was based on some of the very last words in the Old Testament where God said, “I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes”—Malachi 4:5. While these people had a high regard for Jesus as a prophet, unfortunately they did not see Him as the Messiah.

“And others say you are Jeremiah or one of the prophets,” the disciples told Him. Like Jeremiah, Jesus boldly preached the Word of God and suffered because of it. While this answer, like the others, indicates a positive view towards Jesus’ ministry, all 3 answers were wrong and fell short of the truth.

Jesus then shifts the focus to His disciples and to us by asking, “Who do you say that I am?” (And the answer to that question is the key not only to our faith, but also to our joy and our hope in life.) The faith of the disciples is once again being tested, so Peter, who often serves as a spokesperson for the disciples, steps up and says, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Finally, one of Jesus’ disciples gets something right. After all the times the disciples failed, such as how the disciples didn’t think Jesus could feed 5000 people with a small amount of food and wanted to send them away; how Peter didn’t think Jesus cared enough to save him as He was sinking in the water; how the disciples didn’t think Jesus had time for children as they tried to stop parents from bring their children to Jesus to simply have Him touch them; and how last week we saw that they wanted Jesus to send away a woman whose daughter was possessed by a demon, because they thought she was bothering Him; Peter finally gets it right, he passes the test, and Jesus immediately commends Peter’s

confession with words of praise and blessing. Jesus then affirms that the words of Peter's pronouncement were not something that he figured out on his own, but were instead given to him by God – by divine inspiration.

So just imagine how happy Peter and the disciples must have felt, how overwhelmed with joy at finally knowing their Master's true identity. The long awaited Savior of the world, the Son of the living God stood right there in front of them. But just as this great insight finally dawns on the disciples, Jesus suddenly pulls the plug and orders the disciples in the last verse of our text not to tell anyone. What? Excuse me? Having heard the greatest news ever revealed to them, the disciples are told not to tell anyone. They're not supposed to tell their friends, they are not supposed to walk through towns announcing this news, they are not even to tell their families.

Why? Now that they knew who Jesus was, wasn't it their job to go and tell others? Just as Jesus had chosen the time and place to be recognized as the Son of the living God by His disciples, He also knew how little they understood about the nature of His mission and ministry. Jesus was preparing for battle, but not against Herod or an army or a group of terrorists. The battle Jesus was preparing for war against sin and how it destroyed the relationship between God and humankind. For the battle to be won, it would require suffering, sacrifice, faith, obedience, and even death for Jesus. But the disciples did not understand that at all. Imagine how confused and unsettled they must feel, especially when Jesus tells them in the very next verse, verse 21 that we will look at next week, that He is going to die and on the third day be raised to life.

Jesus' mission was so different than what His disciples had envisioned that they had to keep quiet about Him, because it was only after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven that the disciples would be ready to tell the world that Jesus had come not to save people from some foreign government, but to save us from our sins as the only Savior of the world.

How often in our lives do we think we know someone, only to learn that we really don't know them at all? We can live next to a family or work with someone for years and think we know them, but then when that person announces they are getting a divorce, we often discover that in reality we actually know very little beyond the surface. It can be easy for people to think we are Christians, because we attend worship here in this place or online, but beyond this, what indication do we give to others that we know Jesus? Just imagine that would happen if we were to live the way Jesus lived or if we responded to the needs of those around us as He did? Perhaps we would come to know Jesus in a way that would be a reminder to our communities of who He really is: The Son of God, the only Savior of the world, and the only way to heaven.

We may ask a lot of questions in the month of August and while our answers may be important to us or may impact our families, they probably don't really matter to many others. But to the question, "Who do you say Jesus is?" now that answer does matter. We should all care about that answer out of our love for each other. It makes all the difference in this life, and because of what Jesus has done on the cross, it will make all the difference in the next life.