

ABSORPTION AND BINDING

Matthew 16:13-30

A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time, August 24, 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Text

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘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, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 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.’ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

At both the beginning and end of an otherwise news-free and theological free vacation, I was reminded of the fundamental theological question: “Who is Jesus Christ for us today?”

- The first reminder came with news accounts of the Reverend Joel Osteen of Houston, whose wife was the target of an unsuccessful lawsuit brought by an airline stewardess over an incident several years ago. Osteen, you may know, is the pastor of a 40,000-member church in Houston. He is unabashed in linking faith in Christ with personal prosperity. To him, among other things, Christ is one who can set us on a path to personal wealth.
- The second reminder came at the end of my vacation, as the Reverend Rick Warren moderated back to back interviews with our two presidential candidates, Senators Obama and McCain. Warren, as you may know, is a mega-church pastor from California most known for *The Purpose Driven Life* and for his heroic works towards ending AIDS around the world. To him, among other things, Christ is one who gives us purpose and leads us to serve not self, but others.

Beneath the surface at Westminster, we too define who Jesus Christ is for us.

- Looking at our ministries from the outside, one might say that for us Christ is primarily the source and object of our worship, the one in whose name we “worship well,” through preaching and choral music, hymn singing and prayer.
- Or one might say that Christ is primarily the “tie that binds” us together, in our deep friendships in this congregation, in our wide ranging fellowship opportunities from political comedy to multiple retreats, in this rare time when we seem to have a memorial service nearly every week.
- One might say that, at Westminster, Christ is primarily our teacher, as we study scripture, explore theological, political, and ethical issues, learn of the Reformed tradition through our education programs.
- Still again, one might say that to us, Christ is primarily the one who inspires us to leave worship and serve in programs for children, hunger, education, shelter, self-development in this community [CHESS], or in raising a generation of children of AIDS to safe adulthood through Moi’s Bridge orphanage in Kenya.

Behind each of these activities is an understanding, or at least a stress, on the identity of Jesus Christ, on who Jesus Christ is for us.

I.

This question of identity has not arisen in the church simply because we are 2000 years away from the life and death of Christ. It is a question that those who knew Jesus in the flesh – the original disciples – faced. In the passage Casey just read,¹

- Jesus has taught and healed long enough for curiosity about who he is to have arisen among those who have encountered him and those who are growing suspicious of him.
- He has come into the district at Caesarea Philippi, a city in the far north of Israel marked by a diversity of religious ideas and a plethora of gods worshipped, a city, not unlike our own, in which the question of religious identity is relevant.

Jesus asks his disciples what the “word on the street” is about him, not because he is taking a poll, but because he wants to clarify for his disciples his true identity over/against that which is being said or assumed about him.

From among them, the twelve disciples give four answers:

- Says one: “Some say you are John the Baptist,” – a startling and controversial preacher like Jesus.
- Says another: “Some think you are Elijah,” – an Old Testament prophet expected to appear at the end of the age.
- Says another: “I heard just yesterday someone claim you were Jeremiah,” – another Old Testament prophet who, like Jesus, tangled with authorities and experienced painful rejection.
- “A prophet,” says still another, referring to one of the classical prophets – who, like Jesus, spoke with power as they announced the new action of God in the world.

The multiplicity of answers given to the question “Who do people say that I am?” is not surprising. In the centuries since his life and death, people have read the Bible, prayed, worshipped, experienced and come to follow Christ as

- A great teacher of wisdom
- A social reformer
- A champion of individual freedom and worth
- A gentle lover of nature
- A mystic
- Or a streetwise revolutionary.

The reality is that most of us encounter Christ in one of these ways and continue to identify with what initially attracts us. For example:

- If we love children, we respond to Christ’s invitation to a child to come unto himself. Our favorite part of the worship service is probably the children’s sermon.
- If we are motivated by a deep desire that no one in the world go hungry, we respond to Christ’s feeding the 5000. We feel closest to God when we are sharing our bread with another person and we worship best when the sermon is a call to action about hunger.
- If we love literature and the depth of human experience it exposes, then we respond to Christ as a teacher of wisdom. We worship best when we are moved by a good parable, a story posing a profound human dilemma.

What is common to all our understandings – whether we are Joel Osteen or Rich Warren, Peter or Matthew, or any member of Westminster – is that each answer we give to the question “Who is Jesus Christ?” is partially true without being fully true.

- As human beings with limited understanding of the divine, we have a part of the picture without having the whole picture.
- We have a photograph taken with a zoom lens rather than a landscape shot.
- We stare at a point on the map rather than the entire city itself.

We rarely move to seeing the whole of who he is.

“Some say he is a prophet.”

¹ Many of the comments and points in this sermon come from Thomas G. Long, *Matthew* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), 182. In addition, the paper on this passage from Charles Durham at the Moveable Feast Preaching Seminar, January 2008, has been helpful.

“Some say he is Elijah.”

“Some say he is John the Baptist.”

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Given the variety of answers Jesus receives from his disciples, he then asks them a pointed question: “Who do *you* say that I am?”

He asks us the same question:

- Not who does your mother or father say that I am
- Not who does your golfing partner or fellow pre-school parent say that I am
- Not even who does your parish minister or the TV evangelist whose books you keep getting for Christmas say that I am.

Rather, who do *you* say that I am?

When Jesus asks this question of the disciples, as was typical, Peter spoke *up* and *for* the disciples: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” he said.

Peter’s answer is accurate and therefore important.

- To confess Jesus as *Christ* was to confess him as the expected Messiah of the Old Testament, the ideal king for God’s people Israel, the ruler who would fulfill every hunger of the nation for well-being.
- To add that Jesus was also *Son* was to add an even deeper dimension to his identity: the human being whose union with God is so intimate that he participates in the nature of God.
- To go further and say that Jesus was “the *Son of the living God*,” was to claim that Christ was Son of the God of Israel, the creator who summons the winds and scatters the light across the sky, the sustainer and nourisher of the world, as well as the compassionate God who numbers the hairs on our heads.

The bottom line is this: Peter’s confession – Christ/Son/Living God – absorbs every legitimate popular understanding of Jesus. As Christ, Son of the Living God, Jesus was, and is, at one and the same time,

- teacher of wisdom
- social reformer
- champion of individual freedom and worth
- lover of nature
- mystic
- streetwise revolutionary.

Jesus is all of these things at once yet none of these things alone. He transcends our human understandings of him, transfigures our human hopes and expectations about him. He absorbs all of them into his being, without being limited to any one of them.

II.

Though Peter’s answer is correct, he will soon reveal that he does not yet fully grasp the implications of his answer when he denies the dimensions of suffering – the necessity of the cross – in Christ’s Messiahship.

Nonetheless, Christ bestows upon Peter “the keys to the kingdom of God.”

I tell you, you are Peter, and... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven....

Contrary to popular image, “keys to the kingdom of heaven” does not convey that St. Peter will stand at the pearly gates, deciding whom to admit and whom to turn away, spawning hundreds of usually corny jokes we church people tell each other.

In addition, contrary to the way these words are interpreted by most of our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, they do not necessarily teach that authority in the church rests on one leader who stands in succession to Peter.

Rather, bestowing of keys to the kingdom means that what we do and say and decide and embody as the church of Jesus Christ matters. It matters to God. It matters to the world. It matters to us.

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.'

What we do and say as the church of Jesus Christ matters to God. It matters to us. It matters to the world.

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This is tremendous power that the church has been given in the world.

- When in Acts 15 the church decided that the spirit of God was intended for Gentiles as well as Jews and admitted Gentiles to the church with only minimal adoption of Jewish practices, that decision mattered. Had it gone the other way, Christianity would have remained a tiny sect within Judaism rather than have become a worldwide religion.
- When during the Reformation many parts of the church decided that individual Christians have direct access to God, can read and interpret scripture on their own, can make up their mind about matters of importance with “God alone” being “Lord of the conscience” rather than God being mediated through the church, that decision mattered.
- When the church in this country came to realize that slavery was not in fact that will of God, that in this country “all” were created equal, that decision mattered, and we are still in the early stages of fully living into it.

Likewise, today:

- It is important what the church – or parts of the church – teaches about
 - War and peace
 - The nature of marriage and the parameters of family
 - The role of sexual orientation and practice in faith
 - Economic support for the least, the last, and the lost.

“Whatever you bind on earth is bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth is loosed in heaven.” Wow! This is a lot of power and a lot of responsibility for people who by our very nature have a partial picture of who Christ is!

III.

But one final word from Christ to Peter, and by implication, to us:

... I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

The gates of Hades – the gates of Hell – will not destroy the church.

Whenever the church makes a decision – whether something as large as a denomination or as small as a Sunday School class – our decisions matter. We may turn out to be wrong. We may pay dearly. We may miss an opportunity in deciding or not deciding. But in calling Peter, in empowering individuals to be the church in the world, Christ promises the protection of God.

The gates of Hell will not prevail against the church when in good conscience we make decisions that matter.

- Our decisions, made from our partial faith, are *absorbed* into God’s larger identity and nature.
- Our decisions are *bound* – on earth/in heaven – in ways that help rather than harm, not because it is we who have made them but because it is God who does the binding.

Absorption and binding: Christ absorbs our partial understandings and binds our decisions and actions for good, not for ill, on earth, in heaven. Armed with that promise, carrying on flawed and incomplete, we can move forward with confidence, serving the God we know in and through Jesus Christ.

Amen.