

*Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost*

August 27, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew. (Matthew 16: 13-20)

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.

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Do you all know how amazing you are? I have missed you. I have missed you. And in case you haven't been around here before, I've been gone for the past three months, so just to let you know.

Okay, in the spirit of full disclosure, I have not missed the alarm going off at 6:00 a.m. on a Sunday morning. And I have not missed the silent panic when something goes sideways during a worship service. I didn't miss that.

But what I have missed is the community of faith. When violence erupted in Charlottesville, I missed the community of moral discernment. When my kids' former high school blew up a few weeks ago, they went to Minnehaha, I missed my community of prayer. When I was dealing with issues quite a bit this summer, issues of an aging parent, I missed my community of support. And when I saw God this summer, right there in front of me on a dock in Isle Royale, Michigan, I missed a community to tell and celebrate. I have missed this community of faith. Thank you for letting me come back.

Today I would like to talk about dentists, a goat dance, and a question. First, the dentist.

Please pray for me on September the 14<sup>th</sup>. I have a dental appointment. It's not that I have a problem or a cavity or anything that would require a drill. It's just that I know what's coming. "The Talk." It happens every time with every dentist I have ever had. I get "The Talk." "How's the flossing been going?" "Okay." "Do you floss every day?" "Occasionally." And then they start "The Talk." "Do you know how good it is for you to floss?" They give me all of the reasons why I should. And sometimes they think, "she doesn't know how." So they explain in great detail how to floss. Or they go with the scare tactic. "Do you know what's going to happen if you don't floss?" Once a dental tech said, "I've heard positive reinforcement really works, so I'm going to let you know you really are doing well with your teeth. But . . . ." And she started "The Talk."

I get it. I know this is a priority for them. I know they have seen the results of flossing slackers like me. I know it's good for me. I know I'll be getting emails from you this week telling me I should be flossing. I know all this. It's just that my morning routine has other priorities. It's just not my highest priority.

I was always going to ask my dentist – who is a good Catholic – how his prayer life is going. Does he pray twice a day? I'd tell him the statistics and the benefits of prayer, and then dare him to give me "The Talk." But I digress.

I am talking about priorities. We all have to make choices about what we will do or what we will omit in the limited hours we have in a day. We have a lot of choices.

Today, we heard about Jesus in the region of Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi is located in what is now the Golan Heights, up near the border of Israel and Lebanon. In Jesus' day, it was a Roman capital city, with a series of temples for various gods. We got to see it this summer.

There is a temple to Augustus Caesar, the Caesar of Rome. There is a temple to Zeus, the greatest of the gods. There were a number of temples to Pan, who was the god of fertility and agriculture. And my favorite: there was a shrine to the sacred goat dance. Apparently there used to be a statue of goats dancing in the shrine. The mental picture is just amazing.

And there was another temple there. There was a temple there to the god of the underworld, Hades. It was this huge crevasse in the earth. And it was so deep, if you dropped something down in it, you would never hear it hit bottom. It was believed that that opening reached all the way to the River Styx, in the realm of Hades. The temple was known as "the gates of Hades." We heard about that in the Gospel this morning.

So, in this area — and it was about the size of a football field — you could come and pray for power and influence. You could pray for good crops or a healthy birth. You could dance with a goat. You could pray over matters of life and death. It was, in all essence, a spirituality superstore. You could come and ask for whatever you needed. You could ask for anything. Just go to the right shrine and make your sacrifice.

And it was here, among all of these possibilities, that Jesus said, “Who do people think that I am?” In the midst of all these choices, all of these priorities, “Who am I?”

Now, the disciples were good colleagues and good friends, and so they stayed away from the really negative stuff. They didn’t say, “You’re in a Roman city, Jesus. These people don’t know who you are.” And they didn’t say, “There are some among the people that want you dead.” Instead, they thought carefully about it, and they said, “You are not one of these gods for sale. You are a prophet.” A prophet.

Do you know what a prophet is? A prophet is someone who invites us to imagine, imagine what kind of future God is pulling us into. Prophets paint a picture of what could be. They tell us of a world that is whole and beautiful, enough to make your hearts ache for it; enough to make you want to work for it. And, yes, there are times when no one will listen, and a prophet paints a future that is dark and heartbreaking. But it is always a picture of what could be, of what could be among the people of God.

For example: remember what Isaiah said this morning.

*“For the LORD will comfort Zion;  
he will comfort all her waste  
places,  
and will make her wilderness  
like Eden,  
her desert like the garden of  
the LORD;  
joy and gladness will be found in her,  
thanksgiving and the voice  
of song.”*

The prophets fill our imagination with a world that could be. They call us back to God. Even if things are dark, even if they’re going to get darker, the prophets hold up a future of hope, a future that God intends for us and calls us to move toward that future.

And, yes, Jesus was a prophet. He painted a picture of a world where the last would be first, the poor would be honored, the hungry would be fed, where all nations would stand together. He described a world where a wasteful son was welcomed home; where an injured traveler was cared for by an enemy; where the blind could see; where there was wholeness and abundance and joy. Jesus was a prophet. The disciples were astute. People did see Jesus as a prophet.

But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He wants more. “Who do you think that I am?” he asks. And there it is. Priorities laid bare. In Caesarea Philippi, with all of the people and the temples and the gods and the choices, “Who am I to you?” In our world, with all of the demands on time and money and worry and commitment, in the midst of all the priorities, “Who am I to you?” Who is Jesus to you?

Peter answers, “You are the Messiah,” which is Hebrew for “Christ,” which is Greek for “the Chosen One.” Peter says, “I choose you. In the midst of all my priorities, and all my responsibilities, all my dreams, I choose you. I may not know exactly what that means, but I’m stepping up. I am all in. I choose you.”

What does it look like to choose Jesus? I don’t have an easy answer to that, because we all have different gifts and different opportunities, so we each have to figure that out. Peter had no clue what it meant. Spoiler for next week: It took him about five minutes to switch his priorities. Peter couldn’t see that God’s dream for the world included God’s chosen one hanging on a cross. Peter’s imagination wasn’t big enough yet to include resurrection.

And so we, and he, come back again and again to the question: Is what I am doing choosing Jesus? Am I living the great dream that God has for this world? Am I giving and receiving forgiveness? Am I seeing and walking with the last and the least and the lost? Am I offering the love of Christ to each person I meet? Am I living within the great love, the great love that tells me that I am a beloved, gifted child of God, and I am enough in God’s eyes?

Am I choosing Jesus? It is a difficult question, so don’t try to go it alone. Our imagination isn’t big enough yet. God in prayer and the community of faith will surround you as you ask, “Am I choosing Jesus?” God in prayer and the community of faith will challenge you and support you as you try to follow. This I know.

I have missed you all.

Amen.