

## 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?' <sup>14</sup>And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' <sup>15</sup>He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' <sup>16</sup>Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>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.' <sup>20</sup>Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

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Starting at about five years old, people have to get used to being evaluated. It's strange to think of report cards for Kindergarteners, but we have them. It's a risk telling kids that their grades don't really matter until high school because important skills and habits are built in the early schooling years. If you are a student in high school, or if you have been the parent or teacher of a high school student, then you know that grades start to matter a lot once college admission and scholarships come onto the horizon. And because lifetime earnings for college graduates are double those of high school graduates in America, that's the plan for many young people. So by the time a person is twenty two, it can feel like the rest of your life is hanging on decisions you started making when you were fourteen-years-old, or maybe even younger. That's a lot of pressure.

Add to that the fact that social media makes it a lot easier to compare ourselves to others. There is ample evidence that people tend to share their highs and filter out the lows, so social media makes it look like everyone else is happy all of the time except you. Young people I know need mentors and role models to help them wisely navigate the gauntlet of pressures and expectations they face daily. Everyone of us needs a community of people who have invested enough time and vulnerability to really understand us and the complicated lives that most of us live. I don't imagine that Jesus was different. He spent three years traveling the countryside with his disciples without the distraction of cell phones or jobs. They must have gotten to know each other quite well.

So, when Jesus asked his disciples who people compared him to, the answers were... *interesting*. John the Baptist was an eccentric who lived in the desert, dressed in camel hair, and ate bugs dipped in honey. But, he drew a crowd and he seemed to recognize Jesus's greatness before everyone else. But... John the Baptist was beheaded when he became a threat to King Herod and his wife, Herodias. Elijah was the Hebrew prophet and miracle worker who challenged 450 prophets of the Canaanite deity, Baal, to a burnt-offering showdown. After the prophets of Baal called to their god for a full day with no response, Elijah doused his offering in three buckets of water and then summoned the fire of the Lord, which came and consumed the offering. As a celebration, Elijah ordered that the 450 prophets of Baal be rounded up and slaughtered. The story goes that Elijah never died, but was summoned to heaven in a whirlwind of fire and will return, according to the book of Malachi, "before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord." Finally, the disciples tell Jesus that some people say he is like Jeremiah or the other prophets, who were God's messengers, and often brought dire and unwelcome warnings to God's people.

A traditional understanding of Jesus begs the question, “Who cares what other people said about him?” We’ve had two-thousand years of tradition development since the time of the disciples, so the answer feels obvious to us. If someone asked, “Who do you think Jesus is?” Our answer might sound something like Peter’s. We know the answer we’re supposed to give. Peter says, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” If you were raised Catholic, then you may know that this declaration in the gospel of Matthew is the reason that Papal authority is traced all the way back to Peter. Matthew is called “the church’s gospel,” and Peter is the first disciple to identify Jesus as the Son of God. Peter is rewarded with a sweeping pronouncement that he will be the rock on which a mighty church is built that stands against evil and unites the forces of earth and heaven. And if we stop with this passage, rather than continuing on to the next section that will be preached about next week, then we might actually understand why so many faithful people and communities think Christians have all of the right answers and are called to be wielders of power and authority. But, we know the history, and we know that Jesus’s life wasn’t so straightforward.

Ben Chan is a friend and colleague at St. Norbert, and he had a run on Jeopardy earlier this year that our community really enjoyed and celebrated. We watched his first appearance at a huge party with about 200 people and he told stories before the show about what it was like to meet Ken Jennings, how the buzzers work, what happens during the commercial breaks, and all of the things you can only know by being on the show. We watched Ben for two weeks straight as he ripped through round after round, and it felt like he could *literally* go on forever. And then, Ben lost on a spelling error that felt like a technicality and left those of us who know Ben in a state of bewilderment. As the smartest person that many of us know, and after so much success, how could it just be over?

I imagine the disciples riding so high on their association with Jesus that they probably also had not considered the possibility of an end. When Peter declared that Jesus was the Messiah, his mind must have been filled with traditional Jewish images of a great leader who would finally throw off the centuries of violence and oppression that the Israelites had endured. I wanted to believe that my friend, Ben, was invincible, but that's not the nature of game shows. Peter believed that his friend, Jesus, was the Messiah, but as we'll hear next week, he doesn't fully understand what that means. He wants the social media version of his friend—the one that always wins and never suffers.

What Peter comes to understand is that Jesus embodies the true, paradoxical reality of life. The Son of God is vulnerable. The Messiah comes in peace. The church gets things wrong. Life has ups and downs—often at the same time. This is the same gospel that begins when an angel appears to Joseph and asks him to trust that his pregnant virgin wife is actually due with a child conceived by the Holy Spirit who shall be called, “Emmanuel,” which we know means, “God is with us.” And isn't that what we really need? I actually think we need a God who knows how it feels to suffer, and I don't believe we need a church that has all of the right answers. We need what social media can't offer—presence and understanding, compassion and mercy, humility and connection. We need faith in a God who is with us through all of life. We need friends who celebrate us when we win and who stand by us when we lose. We need a church that says, “It's good to let your beliefs evolve and mature, and it's okay when you don't know what you believe.” God is with us.

A few weeks ago, I told you my friend's joke that Jesus's greatest miracle was being a man over thirty with twelve friends. Imagine, for a second, how it might change our faith if Jesus's greatest quality was his ability to model God's presence in our lives. What if Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Messiah didn't signal a final victory, but an ongoing truth about the nature of our existence—that God is with us? I don't know how you Instagram or Facebook the reality of God's enduring presence. It might look like suffering and hope all bound up together. It might look like the last becoming first. It might look like people losing the lives they've strived to protect for the sake of finding life in community with the weak and forgotten. That sounds like a much more interesting version of social media, and I confess that it sounds like a much more interesting kind of church.