

## Matthew 16:13-20 (The Message)

### Son of Man, Son of God

13When Jesus arrived in the villages of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "What are people saying about who the Son of Man is?"

14They replied, "Some think he is John the Baptizer, some say Elijah, some Jeremiah or one of the other prophets."

15He pressed them, "And how about you? Who do you say I am?"

16Simon Peter said, "You're the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

17-18Jesus came back, "God bless you, Simon, son of Jonah! You didn't get that answer out of books or from teachers. My Father in heaven, God himself, let you in on this secret of who I really am. And now I'm going to tell you who you are, really are. You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out.

19"And that's not all. You will have complete and free access to God's kingdom, keys to open any and every door: no more barriers between heaven and earth, earth and heaven. A yes on earth is yes in heaven. A no on earth is no in heaven."

20He swore the disciples to secrecy. He made them promise they would tell no one that he was the Messiah.

### *Who Do You Say That I Am?*

Do you ever wonder what happens to Olympians when they return home? Last Sunday evening was the close of the 2008 Olympic Games, and they showed the

athletes wandering into the stadium. Some won medals, some came in last, but each can claim, for the rest of their lives, that they are an Olympian.

I can imagine what it must have been like before the Olympics—everyone must have been so excited, holding parties, wishing the athletes well as they travel around the globe to compete against the best of the best. It must have been quite a whirlwind, and the title ‘Olympian’ would have been your identity. It would have been everything you talked about, thought about, practiced for and dreamed of for years, finally coming true.

But what happens when they return home? Some, such as Michael Phelps, don’t have to change much, especially given the \$1.6 million he just received for writing a book. Others may carry on competing and searching for sponsors. But what about, say, Brady Ellison? What do you do after going to the Olympics and discovering that you are the 27<sup>th</sup> best archer in the world? Or what about Chris Estrada, who scored a 65.9 in men’s trampoline, good enough for 15<sup>th</sup> place? Where does life go from there?

One of the Home Depot commercials was on and the narrator said that everyone at Home Depot wanted to say one thing to all those Olympians they employ. At this point my wife turned to me and said, “I bet what they really want to say is, “Get back to work.” Isn’t that what happens though? These people have families and jobs to attend to. The world doesn’t stop while they’re off chasing their Olympic dream, and I’m sure the gas bill and the water bill are waiting on the counter when they return home.

Isn't that what happens so often in life? Someone once said that the only thing certain in life is change. Life is constantly changing. We are constantly changing, growing, putting on new identities as we outgrow old ones. If I asked you to describe yourself, what would you say? What would be the words you would use? If I asked you to use only one word, what would it be? Would it be different now than it was twenty, forty, sixty years ago? Or would it be the same? It probably depends on the word. I spent years throwing off old identities and putting on new ones as I realized the old ones didn't fit and the present one just didn't work. The challenge is claiming an identity that fits us. I can claim to be an opera singer, but anyone who has had the misfortune of sitting too close to the pulpit knows that isn't true. Our identity must have integrity with our actions.

In today's reading Jesus is asking the disciples what others believe his identity is. He wants to know what is being said, what is being whispered in the peanut gallery while he speaks. Jesus wants to know what others believe his identity is.

Names such as John the Baptizer, Elijah, Jeremiah and other prophets were suggested. None of these would have been surprising. The people were familiar with prophets. Jesus being a prophet was a comfortable thing; the Jews had countless prophets.

Jesus presses on. He wants to know what the disciples think, what is in their hearts. "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter responds with honesty and firmness, excitably shouting out, “You are the Christ!”

This confession cuts straight to the core, naming the single most important aspect of Jesus Christ. He is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, who has come to save humans from the depths of their own sins. In a word, Peter names Christ for who he truly is.

Jesus answers with joy. “God bless you, Simon, son of Jonah!” He also tells us how Peter knew this. “My Father in heaven, God himself, let you in on this secret of who I really am.” Peter learned who the Christ was only because God revealed Jesus’ identity to us.

But isn’t that how we all learn who Jesus Christ is? We can read the Bible all day, but we only learn who Christ is when God reveals God’s self to us through sudden moments of inspiration, or, more likely, through the hands and feet of God’s beloved children here on earth. I learned who Jesus Christ was because my Sunday School teacher showed up every Sunday even though I might be the only student. I learned who Jesus Christ was because I had Christian friends who showed me Christ through their words and actions. I learned who Jesus Christ was because when I was hurting, others picked me up and helped me carry forward through the love of Christ. God reveals God’s own self to us through so many different ways.

Once Peter has named Jesus Christ as the Messiah, Jesus not only blesses him but also responds with Peter's identity. We are the same. We can only know who we truly are if we know whose we are. We can only discover our true identity if we first claim acknowledge Jesus Christ's identity as our Lord and Savior. Other claims may describe parts of our identity, using the words student and parent, child and friend, but only the identity Christian can describe the truest part of our self, for as a people created by God we can only be complete when we are working in a relationship with God. When we claim our Christian identity with integrity, we are no longer no people, we are God's people. We are no longer aliens in a strange land, rather Christians living in God's world. We become those hands and feet of Jesus Christ in the world, and we go forth in mission.

So how do we discover what actions this identity is calling us to? When an American Indian was ready for the transition from boy into man, he would go on a vision quest, disappearing into the woods for days until he had a vision that would give him a new name, a new identity, and he would return to the community a man, ready to take on the responsibilities that were demanded of a man. We must be sure we dedicate time and energy to the process of discovering what our identity is leading us towards. Those actions may not be the same throughout our life—no one is the same person at fifty they were at thirty. At our core, our Christian identity is the same, but how it unfolds in our lives changes as we change, as we grow and mature and see the world through different lenses. Is our mission changing with us? Are we still taking

the time to find silence and meditation so that we might hear what the Spirit is saying to us?

When the Indians went on their vision quests, they did not undertake it rashly, without guidance. A shaman, or holy man, a man with understanding and knowledge, was expected to point the way, to help the youth grow and understand the journey they were embarking upon.

We are not so different. We cannot uncover our mission alone, and we cannot do it without setting time aside to hear God's voice. If we do not take the time to be silent, how are we going to hear God above all the din that surrounds us? If we do not consult others as we seek God's will, how can we ever expect to know that what we are discerning is correct? If we expect God to send an email telling us exactly what to do with our lives, we will most likely be sorely disappointed. So I encourage you to find a friend, a mentor, someone who you trust, and sit down with them. Tell them your visions, your dreams, your hopes for your life. Tell them what you believe God is calling you to. See what they say. It might surprise you. I hope you will do the same with your hopes and dreams for the church. As we nominate elders for next year, I hope you speak with each other about who you believe should be a leader in the church. As we begin to reshape our children's programs, I hope you speak with each other about your hopes and dreams for the children in the church. As we seek to expand our

mission work in the world around us, I hope you speak with each other about your hopes and dreams for the mission work of the church.

In our baptism we recognize the new identity we have been given in Christ. We recognize that we have pulled on Christ, and that our entire lives are covered in Him. We are called Christians, and from when we rise in the morning to when we lie down at night, that is the core of our identity. God may be using you to reveal God's own self to someone who has never heard the name Jesus Christ. Are we making sure that the actions we undertake, the words we speak, reflect our true identity? We have been blessed, and are called to be a blessing to others, in word and in deed. May we go forth in boldness and tell the Good News of God's saving love to all.