

The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
August 23, 2020
Matthew 16:13-20

“Who Is This Guy?”

In this time of the coronavirus when we are urged not just to wear facemasks for our own sake, but for the sake of other people around us as a health and safety precaution, it can sometimes be hard to identify people – even those whom we know well. And if that other person is wearing not just a facemask, but sunglasses and a hat, it can be nigh unto impossible to recognize who that person is. It can get downright embarrassing when that other person knows who you are – even calls you by name – but for the life of you, you cannot figure out who that other person is. Have you had this experience? And in your mind, you’re asking this question over and over again: “Who *is* this guy?” In today’s Gospel lesson, we have something like this going on. Jesus isn’t wearing a facemask, or sunglasses, or a hat, but he is asking his disciples an identity question. Jesus asks this first on a macro level: **“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”** (Matthew 16:13), and then Jesus asks this on a micro level: **“But who do you say that I am?”** (Matthew 16:15). Jesus asks you and me that same question in our own lives: who do we say that Jesus is? Based on the Gospel lesson, the message for today is entitled, “Who Is This Guy?” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

Jesus chose a very significant location to ask this very significant question. Caesarea Philippi, up north from the Sea of Galilee, was famous for a shrine to the Greek god, Pan, who was worshiped as the god of the wild, trees and groves, sheep and shepherds. Pan was depicted as half-human with an upper body like a man, but with the lower body, legs, hooves, and horns of a goat. He was connected with fertility and the season of spring, and usually shown with the flute that bears his name to this very day: the Pan flute ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pan_\(god\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pan_(god))). In the cliff walls of the grotto where his shrine was located, there were all kinds of niches carved into the rock face – still visible today – where images of many other gods were placed. This is the backdrop, the setting, for what we read in today’s Gospel lesson. In this place where many gods were worshiped, Jesus asks his disciples those questions: **“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”** (Matthew 16:13), and **“But who do you say that I am?”** (Matthew 16:15). Is Jesus just one of many in the pantheon of gods and goddesses? That’s not just a question for the disciples then; it’s a question for each one of us today as well. The gods and goddesses of Greek and Roman mythology may not be what drives us today, but we are always being tempted to worship and serve other gods that seem just as compelling: money, power, addiction, influence, comfort, political correctness, self, just to name a few. Or do we put Jesus into the pantheon of our one-size-fits-all universal spiritual leaders along with Muhammed, Buddha, Krishna, and others? Is Jesus just one voice among the many? Who is this guy? That was and is a mighty important question for us to wrestle with. And each one of us must answer that question.

Peter answers for all of the disciples when he boldly confesses: **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”** (Matthew 16:16). It is a bold confession of faith, and it is remembered each year on January 18, a day set aside by the church called “The Confession of St. Peter.” That was and is who this guy, this Jesus, is: the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Son of the living God. Making this confession isn’t something that we do on our own, by human reason or understanding. It is given to us by God himself as Jesus reveals: **“Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven”** (Matthew 16:17). Luther affirms this in his explanation of the Third Article of the Creed on the Person and work of the Holy Spirit: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the one truth faith.” In the midst of heartache and loss, when

defeat and discouragement are all we know, when everything in life is stripped away, what remains is this saving truth, this confession: **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”** (Matthew 16:16).

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matthew 16:18). Because Peter answered for all the disciples, Jesus’ words are addressed not just to Peter, but to all of the disciples. To be sure, Jesus speaks to Peter, but he is also speaking to all of the disciples through Peter. Peter’s name, *Petros* (Πέτρος) sounds a lot like the original word for rock, *petra* (πέτρα). The rock of confessing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, is not a person – Peter, or anyone else. Peter was, like all of us, mere flesh and blood, subject to sin and death. The rock of our confession is faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. This is the rock on which Jesus builds his church – the confession that Peter made, that all of the disciples made, that we ourselves now make. The gates of hell shall not prevail against it. For a long time, in my mind I pictured this as fearful and frightened believers huddled together while the forces of evil are literally trying to break through the gates to get in. But I have come to understand this in a different way. This isn’t about the church being on the defensive; it’s about the church being on the offensive. That confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, has been let loose in the world. This confession of faith literally breaks down the gates of hell. We have been given the keys to the kingdom – literally! The keys that unlock the treasure chest of God’s mercy and grace flowing through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus have been entrusted to the Church. That’s what Jesus means when he says: **“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven”** (Matthew 16:19). This is one of the Six Chief Parts of Christian Doctrine found in Luther’s *Small Catechism*, “The Office of the Keys and Confession” (<http://catechism.cph.org/en/confession.html>). As we all know, keys both lock and unlock. This is the sacred mystery given by Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God, to his church. “The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to His church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners (unlock), but to withhold forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent (lock). That is the sacred and awesome responsibility that has been entrusted to the church.

So why did Jesus tell his disciples to keep all of this hush-hush in the closing verse of that Gospel lesson? Because Jesus’ redeeming work – his atoning sacrifice on the cross for our sins and his glorious resurrection from the dead for our justification – had not yet been accomplished. Only when the disciples understood this could they then understand what Jesus was calling them to do. For us who live this side of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, we’re no longer called to keep things hush-hush. We are to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:16-20). Not hush-hush, but go-go! Our calling is to help people everywhere know who this guy is: Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God. Amen.