

March 3rd, 2024

Matthew 16:13-20 “Praise the Mount”

“Who do you say I am?” No, I mean really. Who do you say I am? Some of you might say, “Pastor Jesse” which is my official title here at First Christian Church. Along with that title comes a job description that I received when I was negotiating with the search committee 16 years ago. “Minister” is a title that I have too, but not because of anything that pertains to this congregation. Historically, our denomination steers away from that title because we believe that everyone is called to be involved in some kind of ministry. That’s why in some of our publications you’ll see “Minister: all the people; Pastor: Jesse Kearns.” And it’s for this reason, our founders didn’t call their pastors “minister.” And yet, in our denomination’s yearbook I’m listed as “Ordained Minister in Good Standing” and in Virginia I was the “Associate Regional Minister.” Go figure.

I have other roles in the community too. There’s “Host of *Faith and Common Ground* on KZFR 90.1 people powered community radio.” Bill Mash, one of my fellow programmers who died last year always called me “Pastor Jesse.” I’d tell him, “You don’t have to call me that, I’m just Jesse.” He’d say, “No, you’re pastor Jesse wherever you go. You can’t separate yourself from that because a

lot of people outside of the church, including myself, consider you their pastor.” I’m the on again/off again president of the Chico Area Interfaith Council. For the Regional expression of our church, I’m Vice Moderator of the Board, chair of the Ministry Council, sometimes Camp Director and for a while when we were in between Regional Ministers I was Minister of Search and Call. I used to be the guy who coached the film production class at Chico Junior High School’s after-school program where I was Mr. Kearns. I’m father, father-in-law, husband, uncle, great uncle, brother-in-law, cousin, half-brother and grandpa in my family. I’m friend and colleague. Teacher and student. Not everyone likes me, but I’m not going to get into the names some of my detractors call me because some of them aren’t church appropriate. I’ll be honest. Some of those unkind names hurt. But others I wear like a badge of honor and say, “Yup. That’s me.” We all wear many hats and have different “identities.” If we were to ask, “Who do others say I am,” or “who do you say I am” we’d get a variety of answers depending on the circumstances.

This was true of Jesus too. He was son, nephew, cousin, brother, and carpenter as well as rabbi, healer, preacher, prophet. He had his detractors too. He was seen by some as heretic, demon possessed, unorthodox, and an enemy of the state. And in today’s scripture lesson, he was, according to his disciple Peter, “the Christ, the Son of the

Living God.” All our gospel lessons during this Lenten season will focus on Jesus’ ministry as seen through Peter’s eyes. Last week we were in Matthew chapter 14 where after Jesus fed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish, he helped Peter walk on water during a windstorm. This week we’re in chapter 16 and his question regarding who people were saying he was came after he fed four thousand people with seven loaves and an undetermined handful of fish. I like how both Matthew and Mark’s gospels emphasize how much of his ministry involved feeding people. I’m pretty sure he’d get some pushback here today for giving out food to hungry people. He certainly caught some flack about it from some of the “good religious people” in his day. In fact, it was right after some of those religious leaders were harassing him and trying to play “gotcha games” that he asked his disciples who people were saying he was. They answered, “Some say you’re John the Baptist” (who had recently been killed by King Herod). Some were saying he was a prophet ... specifically Jeremiah or Elijah. But Jesus said, “Okay, but who do *you* say that I am?”

That’s when Peter jumped in as he often did and said the first thing that came to his mind. Remember a few weeks ago the gospel writer Mark said that Peter often said things “because he didn’t know what to say.” Well apparently, Peter said something true and worthwhile because Jesus gave him affirmation for saying what he

said. Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Then Jesus said, “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.” This is why the Catholic tradition considers Peter the first Pope. He was the first one to make this confession, and thus he became the disciple who would lay the foundation of the church.

This is also why our church doesn’t use creeds as a test of fellowship. Peter simply confesses, “You are the Christ, the son of the Living God.” He did not recite a creed. When Jesus asked him who he said he was, Peter did not say, “I believe you are Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.” Leave it to us humans to complicate things for the sake of excluding people rather than keeping it inclusive like Peter did. That’s why we don’t use creeds in our

tradition. We use affirmations and professions of faith, but never creeds.

When it comes to affirmations and professions of faith, how can churches become welcoming spaces for those who may not know what they believe, or for folks who aren't ready to make a formal statement of faith? The Rev. Sarah Speed addressed this in a sermon she preached. She said, "Many of us are hesitant to talk about our faith, but I think conviction matters. Do you believe in forgiveness? Do you believe love has the power to change lives? Do you think the world is in need of grace? If so, I want to know about it. Tell me what you believe. Ambiguity can lead to apathy, so tell me what you truly believe. That can have a ripple effect. And so, in our discussions, we affirmed two things: belief should not be a prerequisite for belonging in a church community, and yet, beliefs matter." A statement of faith can be a powerful thing. It certainly was for Peter. Peter was at a crucial junction in his relationship with Jesus. He had been found and called, rescued while sinking, and experienced a profound revelation. These pivotal moments led him to declare who Jesus truly is and the purpose behind his coming.

We too are invited to reflect on where we have encountered God and seen God's hand at work. As we explore Peter's confession, we witness the blossoming of a seed that was sown throughout his journey. This

confession and recognition of Jesus as the Messiah testifies to the transformative power of faith and God's constant presence. Themes of professing faith and seeing the divine in Jesus, as well as unwavering devotion to God, all come to the forefront right here. Peter, previously known as Simon, son of Jonah, symbolizes our own spiritual journeys. Just as he experienced moments of wandering, uncertainty, and questioning, we too must navigate the complexities of faith. Yet God is continually sowing seeds of revelation, patiently nurturing our understanding of God's presence. Peter's confession is a reminder that faith is not stagnant. It's dynamic. It's one of those "mountaintop faith" experiences we talked about a few weeks ago. It's a moment of clarity, when we profess our devotion to God and acknowledge who God is in our lives. It's a declaration that God is near, guiding us along the path of revelation.

Let us reflect on our own spiritual journeys and consider the seeds of revelation in our lives. They shape our understanding of God and draw us closer to God. Let us echo Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God. May our journeys be marked by the continuous growth of these seeds of revelation, leading us to an unwavering devotion to God. Just as Jesus affirmed Peter's confession, may we find affirmation in our faith, as God sees the best version of ourselves and continues to plant these seeds of revelation.

I don't have as many questions for you to reflect on this week, but here are two I'd like you to consider –

Jesus turned to the disciples and asked them, “Who do you say that I am?” How would you answer this question and how has your answer to this question changed throughout your faith journey?

Jesus builds the church on the rock of Peter's faith. In the same way that Peter affirms who Jesus is, Jesus affirms who he believes Peter to be. When things get “rocky,” pun intended, we'll see how Peter sometimes leans on this memory for solid ground, and to remember his calling. The names and affirmations we receive can shape our identity and self-worth, as well as our callings. When have you received a name or affirmation that encouraged you in your journey of faith?