



August 27, 2017 - "WHO DO YOU SAY JESUS IS?"

Matthew 16: 13-20

Given by Rev. Dr. Carlan Helgeson

As I see it, it's the job of a guest preacher to make the congregation wish that the regular pastor was in the pulpit. I will try my best to make you dear people of Nativity wish that Pastor Giuseppe were standing here today!

Speaking of Pastor Giuseppe, you need to go easy on him. It's really hard to minister here in Florida, you know. As one pastor complained about his congregation, "It's so beautiful here in the winter that heaven doesn't seem to interest them; and it's so hot in the summer that hell doesn't scare them either!"

This morning I want to talk about confidence. Everybody needs confidence. All the people I know need to believe that they can make it, that everything will be all right in the end, that life won't do them in. If you don't have confidence, you will break in the storms of life. Without assurance we will never dare to become what God has created us to be!

Do you need any assurance today? Do you need any voice of comfort, any word of confidence that all will work out? Maybe you're thinking of moving and wondering whether it's the right thing to do. Maybe you've just begun a relationship that you have questions about. Maybe you're wondering whether you should stay in the same job. Maybe your kids don't seem as connected to you as they once were, and you need some reassurance that they love you. Maybe your finances are shaky or you just have questions about what you should be doing at this stage in your life.

In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus teaches us that there is nothing wrong with needed assurance. We all need it. It's okay to need assurance in life.

Jesus himself needed assurance.

In the Scripture reading from Matthew, we are told that Jesus had left the country with his band of disciples and gone to the district of Caesarea Philippi, northeast of Galilee. It was foreign territory, Gentile territory, a place apart from the pressing crowds of Jewish peasants who wanted healing and help. The town had originally been called Panias after the Greek god Pan who had been worshipped there. At the foothills of Mount Hermon several niches in the rock façade, still visible today, held statues to Pan and other gods. Herod's son Philip renamed the town after Caesar, who was also worshipped as a god in that place. Not only that, but in Jesus' day water swelled out of the mouth of a deep, dark cave to become one of the sources of the Jordan River. The mysterious cave seemed to be the very entrance to the underworld, the gates of Hades.

It is here in the midst of this foreign pagan center of worship, at the source of Israel's river of life, that Jesus decides to take a survey, or at least to get some feedback from his followers. He had been ministering for months now, and he wanted to

know how he was coming across. It wasn't a Wall Street Journal/ NBC poll, but the Lord just wanted some reassurance that people were getting him.

"Who do people say that the Son of man is?" Jesus asks his disciples.

Have you ever stopped to ask your friends how you were doing? We all need to evaluate our lives from time to time. There are enough people in this world wandering aimlessly through life; we don't need to be one of them. And yet, there is some danger in asking a question that might produce a painful answer. I learned a long time ago that you never ask a question that you don't want to know the answer to. Jill and I abide by that maxim in our marriage.

But Jesus *did* ask what people thought of him. **"Who do people say that I am?"** he said.

The disciples answered, **"Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."**

John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, had preached about the Kingdom of God before Jesus; but John had been beheaded by Herod Antipas and was dead. Some saw Jesus as John-returned-from-the-grave.

Others understood Jesus to be Elijah, for ancient prophecies in Judaism predicted that Elijah would come before the glorious Messianic Age. People thought Jesus might be getting them ready for the end times. Still others saw Jesus as simply another prophet, like Jeremiah, who had warned the people of the impending destruction of Jerusalem six centuries earlier.

This feedback must have been disheartening for Jesus. He knew his divine calling from God. He knew that he was more than a prophet, more than an evangelist. He was the Savior. He needed some assurance that his mission was not failing. He gave it one last shot. He decided to ask not about the fickle crowds but about what his closest friends thought. After all, *they* were the ones who had walked with Jesus, eaten with him, listened to his message day and night, and slept beside him. **"But who do you say that I am?"** Jesus asked.

His star pupil, the class brown-noser, Peter, pipes up and responds, **"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."**

What glorious words! O happy day! 'Twas not all in vain! Someone *did* get it! Someone *did* understand! It was the assurance that Jesus was looking for. It was the assurance that Jesus needed.

Jesus was elated that Peter knew who he was; and yet Jesus recognized that such truth was a gift. To know the Son of God as the Christ, the Messiah, was divine doing. **"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!"** he says. **"For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven."**

Did you ever wonder why some people seem so at home in the faith and others don't seem to have a heart for God at all? Sometimes even in our own families, among our own children, there are those who were raised in a Christian home but they just don't seem to understand; they seem so far from the kingdom. We don't get it...unless we remember that faith is a gift. We can't buy it or sell it; we can't spread it; we can't even give it to those we love the most. The recognition of Jesus as the Son of God and Savior—the essence of Christianity—is a divine prerogative. But O what a gift that recognition is! It's an unbeatable advantage in a world full of disappointments. Jesus

needed assurance for his ministry; he receives it. Then he offers the same to us, his church.

Jesus assures us, the Church. Jesus gives us the confidence to be who we are and march into the future with hope.

The Greek word for rock is *petra*. (Some of you may have been to that famous rock city of the Nabateans in Jordan by that very name.) Peter's name in Greek is *Petros*. Jesus uses a play on words to drive home a powerful point. He tells his shining disciple, **"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."** You are *Petros* and on this *petra* I will build my church and death itself will not destroy it!

How do you think Peter was feeling after that acclamation? He must have been riding high! Can't you just imagine the apostle prancing around with a grin on his face, looking down his nose at the others? Jesus had just praised him. Peter was encouraged!

We could use a lot more encouragement in the church. Encouragement keeps us going in tough times.

Last week I read about Dr. Theodor Geisel. He wasn't very good in school and he didn't care for athletics. He preferred to doodle and draw. Nobody seemed to appreciate that, though. During WWI, Ted was a Boy Scout and was one of the top ten Liberty Bond sellers in town. He was set to receive an award from non other than ex-President Theodore Roosevelt, but apparently Roosevelt had only been given 9 medals and Ted was 10th in line. The boy had his recognition dashed and was quietly ushered off stage. At college his classmates liked Ted's silliness, but they voted him "Least Likely to Succeed." With no money and no job, Ted went on to further studies at Oxford with little acclaim. Then one day, a classmate he had a crush on looked over his shoulders at his doodling and whispered, "That's a very good flying cow." That was all the encouragement Ted needed. He left school, moved home, and started believing that he could make a living drawing cartoons. *The Saturday Evening Post* employed him and he was on his way to becoming a household name. I'm sure that you've all read his books. His pen name was Dr. Seuss.

One word of encouragement changed his life! One word of encouragement can still change lives! When is the last time you've encouraged someone who ministered in the church? When did you last write a note of appreciation for a musical number or a special effort in the congregation? Children aren't the only ones who need encouragement! We all need it, and we're all asked to give it both in here and out there!

Peter was flying high. So should we! Not even death can do in the church! And if the last enemy, the most ferocious adversary, cannot destroy the church, what could there be that can? Nothing!

I've been part of Nativity for just two years, but I have already picked up on the anxieties around here. Some people have left the church and others are moving. Summer attendance has been down and finances are a continual worry. People are concerned about the future of the church. Maybe what we need right now is to hear those words of Jesus anew. We need to be sure that our congregation will not just survive, but prosper. Why? Because the church has tremendous power in this world, power to change the world.

After Peter's confession and Jesus' assurance, the Lord speaks about the source of the power: **"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."**

Jesus entrusts to the church the power to expose the realm of God to others. Who is that church? It's you and I! Jesus gives us the keys; and you don't have to be a big shot in the church to get them either! You don't have to be a deacon or on the Council or on the A-list of church members to get the keys. All who confess Jesus as the Savior have them!

Jesus talks about binding and loosing. What does he mean? He means that we have the authority to open the gates to God or keep them closed. How? When we refuse to tell people about Jesus and our faith, when we refuse to invite them to worship God, refuse to live out God's love in mission in our community; we shut the door on them. People will never enter the kingdom, at least if it depends on us. On the other hand, if we tell everybody we know about Jesus and what God is doing and invite people to church and live with gentleness and winsome kindness, we will draw people close to the God we know and the Savior we love. You have the power to change the world!

One thing you'll discover about me, if you don't know already, is that I enjoy life. I believe that we ought to take advantage of all the beautiful, wonderful things God sends our way. Yet there is more to life than just living for ourselves and doing our own thing. Since my retirement Jill and I have gone a lot of places and done a lot of things. It's been a blessing; yet this one thing I know: You can't be on vacation for the rest of your life or you will lose your very soul, that sense of purpose that keeps you alive on the inside. We are called to bring Jesus to the world. This church at 6363 Commercial Way was not founded to be some country club where we sit around singing Kum Ba Yah and sipping on sacramental wine. It was founded as an Outpost for Jesus in Weeki Wachee! We gather here to worship God and fellowship in order to gain the peace and energy we need to go out *there* and bring God's love and Jesus' grace to this community. If we do that, this church will never die.

In the latest issue of the magazine, *Sojourners*, I read with interest a first-hand account of someone who sat in St. Peter's basilica in Rome to celebrate the sainthood of Mother Teresa. Hanging in the front of the chapel was a huge banner of the saint who had given so much to the poor in India and around the world. Author Dean Nelson was seated next to a woman from Manhattan who had worked alongside Mother Teresa. He asked the woman what she thought Mother Teresa would say to those gathered in the church. She replied, "She'd say, 'What are you doing just sitting here? Why aren't you serving the poor? Why did you go to all of this expense instead of using the money to serve others? Get out of here! Have you learned nothing from me? Go love your neighbor!'"

Dear people of faith, there is so much need in our world. We can't do everything; we can't solve all the problems in our society; we can't change things overnight. But we can do something. We've got power, the power of faith. And when we go into our world, God has our back. And when we face discouragements and disappointments, Jesus runs interference for us. And when we've reached the end of our strength and wisdom, the Spirit intercedes for us.

Don't worry about doing great things. Just do something. How about rejecting racism and bigotry in a visible way? My own daughter was so distraught over the Charlottesville attacks that she is sponsoring what she calls a Diversity Party in her home, inviting people with different ethnicities and sexual identities and religions for food and fellowship, and she has invited all her Face Book friends to bring someone different from them with them, too. It will be a celebration of all God's people. Will it make a difference? Surely for those who are feeling afraid right now because of the current social climate! Maybe we could do something like that in the church.

And how about you teenagers and young adults inviting some friends to church? I spent 35 years in Christian ministry, in part, because of such invitations. You see, my father was the only one in his family ever to join a church. He went with a school friend to a Methodist Church. And my mother was the only one in her family to go to church; she went to the United Church of Canada because a friend asked her to go with her. I grew up in a Christian family because some kids invited my parents to church. Can you do the same?

The opportunities are endless. We have taken some of them, like the food pantry and quilt ministry and Days for Girls. Keep on keeping on! Just get out there and don't be a freeloader in the church. You have power, the power of Jesus! Use it!

I close with a story from the little town of Cocodrie in the bayou country of Louisiana. A hitchhiker got caught in a thunderstorm on a dark and foggy night. Time passed and no cars went by. It was raining so hard that the man couldn't even see his hand in front of his face. Suddenly he saw a car coming toward him, moving slowly and appearing almost ghostlike in the rain. It slowly and silently crept toward him and stopped. Scared out of his wits, but needing a ride, the man jumped into the car. Only after closing the door did he realize that there was no driver in this car and there was no engine noise. Again the car crept slowly along. What it approached a curve in the road, the man thought about jumping out but was too scared. He prayed, begging for his life, for he was sure that the car would go off the road and end up in the bayou where he would drown.

Just before the curve, a shadowy figure appeared out of the mist and a hand reached through the window and turned the steering wheel, guiding the car around the bend. Then, just as silently, the hand disappeared. Paralyzed with fear, the guy watched the hand reappear every time the car reached a curve. Finally, the man couldn't take it anymore and jumped out of the vehicle and ran for town.

Wet and in shock, the guy went into a bar and, in a quivering voice, ordered two shots of whiskey. Then he told everyone about his supernatural experience. All were in hushed awe and got goose bumps when they realized that the man had truly experienced what he was talking about.

Half an hour later two newcomers walked into the bar. Looking around, one guy said to the other, "Look, Boudreaux, ders dat idiot dat rode in our car when we wuz pushin it in de rain!"

Dear friends, don't be a hitchhiker in Christ's Church. Don't be a freeloader in God's Kingdom. You have been given power, the power of assurance that comes from knowing Christ as Savior. Use it in the world! Share Christ's love and mercy with others. Jesus stands calling to us, "Who do people say that I am?" People will know him by what they see in us. Amen.