

Questions Jesus Asks Sermon Series
From Solid to Satan - Matthew 16:13:23
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A few weeks ago, your Crestwood ministerial staff went on an overnight retreat to Shaker Village. The day-to-day demands of ministry can make it hard to get away, so I'm thankful we were able to do so. We spent the time in prayer, in conversations, sharing meals together. Despite the freezing rain and a wasp infestation, we enjoyed retreating from our daily demands to rest and rejuvenate.

By doing this, we were following in the footsteps of Jesus, because in our passage today, Jesus and his disciples go on a staff retreat. For fifteen chapters he's been on the go, healing people, teaching crowds, dealing with demons (and maybe wasp infestations?), getting interrupted. Every time he's tried to catch his breath someone else has been there with their withered hand outstretched or their sick child by their side. He knows the road that lies ahead of him leads to the cross, so Jesus realizes that he really needs to get away.

The place where Jesus and his disciples retreat is a peculiar choice, not quite as swanky as Shaker Village. The name of the city was originally named after the Roman god Pan. The city was in the domain of Herod Phillip, one of the sons of Herod the Great, who ruled at the time of Jesus' birth. In order to get on the emperor's good side and proclaim his own sovereignty, Phillip changed the name of the city to Caesarea Phillipi. The city was well-known for its pagan worship and was dominated by an enormous temple dedicated to Caesar, as well as several smaller temples dedicated to other gods. It would have been like our staff going for a retreat in Las Vegas. Maybe next year? This was as far away from Jerusalem as you could get and still be in Israel.

This is hostile territory for Jesus and his followers, so why would Jesus want to come here to get away? Well, one of the benefits is that Jesus was pretty much assured of not being recognized or bothered. But there was a deeper reason for Jesus bringing his disciples here. They were surrounded by all sorts of statues and monuments and temples dedicated to pagan gods. In the midst of this cultural conglomeration of false religions, with idols all around looking down on them, Jesus asks the disciples to stand up and make a statement of faith. All of these false gods promise prosperity and bumper crops and the newest chariots and keeping up with the Caesars. Following Jesus will bring trials and suffering. To whom do the disciples pledge their allegiance?

Before Jesus cuts to the chase, he wants a sampling from the grapevine. So, he takes his own Gallup survey: "You fellas have been out among the people. You've heard the talk on the street corner. What are you picking up? What's being said about me?" The disciples report that Jesus has a favorable rating in the polls. While we don't necessarily believe people come back from the dead (unless you count zombies), back then it was a common belief. So, some thought he was the recently beheaded John the Baptist, who would prepare the way for the true Messiah. Some thought he was Elijah or Jeremiah or another prophet, returned from the dead to pronounce the return of the Messiah. All of these speculations pay respect and tribute to Jesus, because it means they saw him as a great man and forerunner of the Messiah, God's anointed one who will rescue the Jews from Roman oppression. The disciples lay out the facts of what people are saying.

But Jesus wants more than facts from them. His disciples have been with him for three years now, following him around, watching his ministry, experiencing the kingdom of God through his teachings and miracles. Jesus is now ready to ask the real question: Do the disciples get it, or are they still the Duh-ciples? Do they understand him? Do they know who he really is? So, he looks them in the eye, and he says, “But what about you? Who do you say that I am?” They could no longer report what others were saying. They had to say it for themselves.

Have you ever had to say for yourself what you believed about Jesus? It’s hard to be put on the spot like that. Disciples pastor Fred Craddock says that, “you don’t know what you believe until you hear yourself say it.” I spent four years in seminary with my nose buried in books, studying all about this kind of thing, but one of the hardest questions I faced when I interviewed at my first church was, “Share with us your belief in the one God and your acceptance of Jesus Christ as your personal savior.” Uh...um...well. How would you answer that? Who do you say he is?

Peter, never a person to miss an opportunity to open mouth and insert foot, pipes right up to provide an answer. “You are the Messiah, the Christ.” Hey, he got this one right! He’s the first human being in the gospel to say who Jesus really is (interestingly, a few demons had already identified him as the Son of God). Finally, after fifteen chapters, someone gets it. Jesus must have thought the same thing, because he follows up Peter’s declaration praising him, claiming he will be the rock upon which Jesus will build his church.

Jesus then tells them the plan: He will suffer, be rejected by the Jewish leaders, be killed, and then rise again. Unfortunately, Peter the rock becomes Peter the rockhead. Just when Jesus thought Peter truly understood, Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him for this downer of a prediction. At this point, Jesus must be looking for a rock to bang his head against. The verb for “rebuke” conveys a sense of superiority, as if Peter had the right to tell Jesus what God’s mission really was. “You’re the Messiah, you can’t die! If you die, the bad guys win.” Notice Peter doesn’t seem to get the last part of the prediction about Jesus rising again. That seems like a kind of important part of the plan, but Peter can’t get past the first line: “The Son of Man must undergo much suffering.”

Why does Peter respond so sternly to Jesus? Because that’s not how it’s supposed to happen! The prophets said the Messiah would come in glory, bringing with him victory over the oppressors and the restoration of God’s kingdom on earth. The Messiah would be a conquering hero, vanquishing the Romans and re-establishing David’s reign. The Messiah was going to be a winner! But the Messiah suffering and dying? Are you kidding me? This is the opposite of who Peter thought Jesus was supposed to be. So, Peter, rebukes him, completely missing who Jesus really is.

Not that we do any better, you know. It’s really easy to latch onto the Jesus who does miracles and heals people and says really wise things, the Jesus who’s a winner, but not so easy to understand the Jesus of the cross. We want the sanitized Jesus, the one that fits our image of follows our agenda. But Jesus is so much more than that, so much more than we can ever understand. Depending on which parts of the gospels you read, and which parts you choose to believe, Jesus could be a revolutionary, a nonviolent teacher, a charismatic healer, a Galilean holy man, a fervent prophet, a nice guy, a peasant leader, or a wandering Cynic. In the gospels, he is all of these things, and at various times in our lives, we need him to be these things. But he is also more than these things.

Peter almost got that, but in the end he tries to define the Messiah in terms that best suit him. What he didn’t realize is that as soon as you call someone “Messiah,” you give up the right

to define what that means. Confessing faith in the son of God automatically assumes that we relinquish faith in all the other gods around us clamoring for our time and attention. As Peter learned, when talking about Jesus, we have to do more than just get his title right. We have to acknowledge that we'll never really know him, but that shouldn't keep us from following him.

Maybe that's what truly tripped up Peter. When Jesus starts to predict all that's going to happen to him, perhaps Peter realized that to follow Jesus not only means following him to Galilee and Tyre and Sydon and Caesarea Phillipi, it also means following him to Jerusalem, where he will be accused of blasphemy; and following him to the Upper Room, where he will talk about his broken body and spilled blood; and following him to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he will be betrayed and arrested; and following him to Pilate's house, where he will be tried and convicted; and following him to Golgotha, where he will be crucified. It's easy to follow a Messiah who's a winner, but not this Messiah. I believe to maintain our integrity when we profess the name of Jesus Christ, we must be consistent in following him, regardless of where that leads us in our lives. When we enter Holy Week in a few weeks, we'll have an opportunity to follow Jesus all the way to the cross. Are we willing to go there?

That's hard work, and it may lead us to some places we'd rather not go. Maybe it leads us to the hospital room of a dying congregation member, as we provide comfort to them. Maybe it leads us to a meeting where we help a ministry team as it carries out its plans. Maybe it leads us to a Worship and Wonder room as we help the children of Crestwood take their next step of faith. Maybe it leads us to a soup kitchen, or a women's shelter, or the steps of the Capitol, or an English as a Second Language classroom. If we really believe Jesus is the Messiah, if we are going to speak his name, we have to be prepared to follow him, no matter where it leads.

"Who do you say I am?" That's not a question we can only answer once in our lives. It's not even a question we should only answer each time we join a church. I believe it's a question we have to answer every day. Can we stand up amidst the foreign gods all around us, the ones making all kinds of promises they won't keep, and confess our faith in Jesus? I admit that there are days when I don't want to follow Jesus. It would be a lot easier to do my own thing, and sometimes I do. But each new day is another opportunity to answer the question. "Who do you say I am?" A teacher? A prophet? A nice guy? A mascot? A spiritual ATM? Or is he something more? "You are the Messiah, the Christ, the son of God." I hope for us that's more than just a title. I hope it has an impact on how we live our lives, on the choices we make, on the way we decide what gets our time and attention and money. If someone were to observe your life for one day, would they know at the end who you followed, not only by what you said, but by how you acted? What about you? Who do you say he is?