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8/21/11

Speaking the Truth

Matthew 16:13-20

David did such a nice job of reading that Matthew passage for us. Every time I hear it, though, I cannot help but remember another time, another voice speaking these words. Years ago in seminary we had classes during which we had to preach for our peers and our professors. It was daunting. Many of us struggled. One man who struggled a great deal was Tom. When Tom preached for our class the first time his voice was so quiet and was so monotone that we all struggled to even remain conscious! Our professors talked with him. "Put some inflection into it," they advised. A couple of weeks later we settled ourselves into the seminary chapel pews. We all, I am certain, hoped Tom had been practicing for it was time for him to preach again. Just before he climbed the pulpit steps, a professor pulled him aside, "Give us something a bit more powerful," he cajoled. And so Tom climbed the steps, he opened his Bible, he began to read these same words from Matthew, saying, [whispering softly and in a monotone voice] "Jesus asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah...'" He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, [voice booming in microphone] "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." We were awake. It was powerful alright. Perhaps not quite the "powerful" our professors were looking for.

It doesn't seem like this text should be offered with such ferocity, with such fervor. For it is Jesus with his friends in a moment of sharing. Jesus wants to find out what the world thinks of him. It turns out, what they think is not surprising. We have read it all earlier in this gospel. Others have thought Jesus reminded them of John the Baptist including King Herod who worried Jesus was John come back to life. For ages the people had been waiting for Elijah to return and his return would signal the end of the age and the day of the Lord. This seems to fit with what Jesus has been teaching. And the prophet Jeremiah, the one who suffered so greatly and fought with the authorities of his day, that also seems about right. All point to some part of Jesus and his ministry but none fully encapsulate who he is and what he does. When Jesus presses for a personal answer: "Who do you say that I am?" Peter takes a shot.

Though his words are a powerful statement, they should not surprise us. From the first verse of Matthew's gospel we have known we are about to encounter the Messiah, the Christ; and the disciples, once they saw him tame the storm, already confessed that Jesus must be the Son of God. Even Peter's new name is not new. He has had the nickname since he was called to leave his fishing behind and follow Jesus instead. Truly, there is nothing new shared in this text; nothing that should shock. The power of this passage is not in its new information but in that everything we've known about Jesus now comes together into a confession that changes everything. Matthew's gospel has been building and building toward it. It feels a lot like our life of faith. The bits and pieces of Jesus we have experienced or learned can mean very little to us and then a moment happens, perhaps nothing new has been added but now all the bits and pieces add up to an equation where we will never be the same.

This is the transformation Paul speaks about in Romans when he calls us to not be conformed to this world, but be transformed. All of the identities the disciples placed upon Jesus were correct, in

part. They knew he was a prophet who spoke of a new age to come so they put him in the same category as the prophets of old, as the things that had come before. But Jesus does not conform to the things that have come before. He transforms what came before and brings in a whole new age. This new age brings a new set of standards, of expectations. No longer do we just give over possessions in our worship—an animal for sacrifice, a donation in an envelope—in this new age we now give our whole selves: “present our bodies as a living sacrifice...”. Jesus expects all of us, every part, to be transformed by him and, once transformed, to be offered back to God.

What does it mean to live in Christ’s “new age?” How do our lives change? Really, what we are asking is, What does it mean to be a Christian? It may seem simple but we will wrestle for a deeper and deeper answer to this question for our entire lives. First of all, it means we have to turn our world upside down for, in Christ, power is found in our weakness and we live in abundance when we deny ourselves. And to save your life, you have to lose it. This is so difficult! Even Peter, after his amazing moment of transformation, cannot take this next step. Just after our passage ends Jesus tells them that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die so that he can be raised and Peter rebukes him. Peter gets in Jesus’ face and tells Jesus *he* doesn’t understand all that this new age means. And so the rock of the church becomes a stumbling block. We stumble as well when we believe that the priorities of our world can match our priorities as a Christian. They cannot. When the world talks about “getting ahead” they do not mean “give everything and follow me.” When the world talks about power they do not mean a suffering servant. The two cannot be harmonized. Neither the Church, nor its members, can be at home in this old world’s values. Instead, we must always, always, call ourselves back to the values of Christ’s new age. For, once we are Christ’s, we cannot go back. We are a part of what is to come.

What does it mean to live in Christ’s “new age?” You can tell it also means that there is no halfway. Jesus is asking for all we have. Our bodies, minds, spirits, gifts, lives, Jesus asks us to give it all so that we can follow him. Every aspect of our life changes if Jesus really is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” If it is true, then how can we not give all that we have as an offering to him?

And, you know, living in the new age of Christ means something else quite astounding: what we do affects God. This is a tricky subject for us Presbyterians who take comfort in the knowledge that God is unchanging and that we are justified, not by what we do but by God’s grace. And yet, here it is in our scriptures. Jesus tells Peter, and through Peter the church, that he is giving us the keys of the kingdom of heaven. What we do on earth affects what happens in heaven. What Jesus’ followers do, matters to God. What we do in this new age—what we confess, what we give, what we take, what we deny, what we worship—it affects God. Astounding! Our lives can be pleasing to him or they can be a block to stumble over.

“So, who do you say that I am?” Jesus asks. And the answer is powerful alright. Perhaps not quite the kind of powerful we were looking for. But if Christ is truly the Messiah, the Son of the living God, then everything is different than it was before. And, it seems that we probably shouldn’t have snickered in those chapel pews that day because the seminary student Tom was right. When speaking the truth—truth that matters—it doesn’t hurt to leave an impression.
Amen.