

Wandering Heart: Praise the mount

Jesus asks, "Who do *you* say I am?"

Matthew 16:13-20
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
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Earlier this week I attended a meeting of the Synod of the Sun near Dallas as a commissioner from Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery. Our synod is the geographical area that includes the PC(USA) congregations and presbyteries within the states of Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas. Perhaps the most important item on the agenda was the examination, to be followed by a vote of approval or not, of a candidate to be our new Synod Leader and Stated Clerk. After many questions and thoughtful answers by the candidate, one person raised his hand and said, "**I call the question**".

For those of you not familiar with parliamentary procedure as outlined in Robert's Rules of Order (one of my favorites books), to "call the question" is **a motion used to end debate on a pending question, meaning a previous motion, and bring it to a vote immediately. Its purpose is to stop talking about a topic and come to a decision.** By the way, this person was unanimously approved, but it's still confidential because the congregation this person currently serves as pastor is only being told this morning. May God be with them.

In the Gospel reading we heard from Matthew 16, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" After they answer, **Jesus, in effect, calls the question. He asks them directly, "But who do you say that I am?"** No more discussion, come to a decision and answer the question now.

Today, I call the question, posing the same one to you: Who do you say Jesus was and is? Peter is the disciple who answers Jesus' question. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". Is that your answer, or perhaps part of your answer? And if so, what do those words actually mean to you? For we later learn that Peter's understanding of "Messiah" is not the same and Jesus'. The same goes for the words, "trusting in Jesus as Lord and Savior". For that also **means different things to different people. And here at College Hill, that's okay!**

For Peter, however, his declaration is another mountaintop experience in his journey of faith, hence the title from our resource material for this week, "Praise the mount". I wasn't quite sure how that fits into this biblical story since it doesn't take place on a mountain. But the resource material explained. That phrase is something we sang in our opening hymn, *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. The first verse concludes, *Praise the mount! I'm fixed upon it, mount of God's unchanging love!*

Our resource material goes on to make the following connection with their overall theme, *Wandering Heart: Figuring out faith with Peter*.

In this story, Peter proclaims who Jesus is. He speaks with **conviction**. Peter claims his faith. **If you had to speak your faith in one sentence or phrase, what would you say?**

When we have the courage to say, "This, I believe..." then that conviction has a ripple effect on others. When life gets rocky, we lean on mountaintop moments and our deepest convictions to see us through.

Then the resource asks perhaps an equally important question, one that certainly applies to us here in this community of faith. **"When it comes to professions of faith, how can churches be welcoming spaces for those who don't yet know what they believe, or for those not ready to make a formal statement of faith?"**

The **Rev. Sarah Speed**, writer of the worship bulletin liturgy in our resource material, explains her approach to the question, "Who do you say I am?"

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 their discussions, they affirmed two things: **belief should not be a prerequisite for belonging in a church community, and yet, beliefs matter.** I agree with that, for statements of faith can be powerful, as it certainly was for Peter.

A decision made here at College Hill even before I became the pastor in 2008 was to **not use the Apostles' Creed** (or Nicene Creed for that matter, both of which are included in our Presbyterian *Book of Confessions*, part of our church constitution) in the part of the service of worship we call the **Affirmation of Faith**. I had no problem with that decision and have followed that tradition. That's because what a group of men decided in the early 4th century, which didn't reach its final form for another few hundred years, of what they believed, especially about Jesus, while fine for them, **does not define the faith beliefs for many today, especially those in theologically progressive congregations.** And yet, I continue to choose and include an Affirmation of Faith each Sunday because there are indeed many things for which we do hold convictions, and have power when spoken aloud together. I change the language, however, from "I believe..." because I don't know exactly what you believe, I don't want to put those words in your mouth.

Saying all that, I want to reaffirm that **searching for the language to express your faith beliefs is important.** That's because **what you and I believe, our convictions, play an important role in the actions that flow from those faith beliefs.** Resource biblical commentator, Dr. Terence Lester, writes that like Peter:

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...

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 but dynamic...

Dr Lester concludes, and I encourage, **“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.”**

I want to add that your answer to who you believe Jesus was and is may have changed throughout your own life and journey of faith. It certainly has in mine. **Diana Butler Bass**, a previous Harold E. Hill Lecture Series speaker here at College Hill, has written an entire book of how she has answered this question throughout her life and journey of faith. The title of her latest book, published in 2021, includes in the names of each chapter how she has understood Jesus. It's entitled, ***Freeing Jesus: Rediscovering Jesus as Friend, Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence.***

Over and over again, we here at College Hill also continue to explore and ask ourselves, who Jesus was and is. And **not all answers fit nicely into a traditional and historical understanding of Jesus, nor the language used.** Just one example, and I will make this personal so as not to assume anyone else either believes or should believe this.

I no longer see Jesus as a blood sacrifice, rejecting one understanding of the atonement where Jesus functions as a sacrificial lamb whose primary purpose in coming was to die to save us from our sins, as demanded by a God who needed a blood sacrifice to appease his righteousness and anger in order to forgive and save us.

That simply is not my belief about the nature and character of God, nor the purpose of Jesus' mission and ministry. And I fully understand that the answer to many theological questions is and should be, “I don't know.” Yet, perhaps not to every question. In her blog, *pastordawn BEYOND CHURCH: progressive visions of Christianity beyond church*, which I encourage you to check out at **pastordawn.com**, she writes:

Those of us who claim to be followers of Jesus and claim to be progressive Christians **must answer the question of Jesus' identity, with more than, “I don't know?” We need to have the courage to face the realities which we have discovered, even if those realities fly in the face of centuries of Church teachings!**

She adds, and I affirm, “So, as a teacher and a preacher my role in the Body of Christ, is to dwell in the questions about Jesus' identity, not to provide you with “the” answer, but hopefully to help you find your own answers, and I do mean answers because **there isn't only one answer but rather, there are answers.**”

Perhaps you can resonate with one of her answers when she writes:

Who do you say, Jesus IS??? This is a question which each of us, you and I, fellow members of the Priesthood of All Believers, we must wrestle with if we are to learn how to embody the LOVE which is God in the world.

I believe that the **transformational power of the LOVE which Jesus lived and died to embody**, is the power we members of the Priesthood of All Believers are called to be in the world, right here and right now.

May the ONE who IS LOVE live and breathe in, with, through, and beyond us, now and always.

Amen.

Resources:

A Sanctified Art, *Wandering Heart: Figuring out faith with Peter*, Lent 2024.

<https://pastordawn.com/2020/08/23/who-do-you-say-jesus-was-and-is-matthew-1613-20/>