

Saying More Than We Know

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on August 23, 2020

Friendship Presbyterian Church

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he 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 or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘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.’ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?’

‘For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.’

(Matthew 16:13-28, NRSV)

One of my favorite people of all time was the Associate Pastor I grew up with in my home church – from about the time I was 12 years old to well after I had headed off for college. His name was Ray Stover. He was one of the three or four most genuinely good people I’ve ever known. He passed away almost 17 years ago, but I still remember his deep love for my family, for me ... I remember his heartfelt prayers and his great enthusiasm for the Old Testament. And I remember a certain trademark of his in his informal talks and bible studies: He often closed with the words, “Well, I should wrap up, because I’ve already said more than I know.”

“I’ve already said more than I know.” I always loved that. And perhaps it was even true, but you *know* that Ray Stover isn’t the only person who has ever said more than he knew. Have you ever written a paper for a class? Have you ever been put on the spot, or just felt the need to go beyond what you really had on hand? For that matter, have you ever been a pastor who knows

very well that he is a struggler like anyone else, and sometimes has to draw on more than just what's in here ... more than he really understands, more than he's completely sure of? I suspect you know what I mean.

The truth is, we in the church say more than we know all the time. And in this, as we approach this morning's gospel text, we might see our kinship with our old friend Simon Peter ... "Stepping out of the boat" Peter! Well, Peter's at it again!

As Jesus and his disciples come into the district of Caesarea Philippi, it's a time of great excitement, with word of Jesus' ministry spreading rapidly. Reports of large crowds and miracles meet up with desperate longings and heightened expectations, and so the stories turn *electric*.

Surely the disciples themselves wondered: Who *is* this man who commands the wind and the waves ... who can feed thousands with only a few loaves and fish ... who is unafraid to touch lepers ... who has bidden us leave everything behind and follow him? Could he really *be* one of those old prophets we have heard about all our lives, back for a time such as this? Could he even be Elijah himself, ready to appear, as Malachi foretold, "before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes"?

Jesus knows that questions like these are swirling. He knows that the disciples themselves are *thinking* them, even if they are afraid to say so out loud. And with Jerusalem looming and days of darkness to come, Jesus is ready to talk about it. He makes no attempt to ease his way into it, and so, he asks his companions what they're hearing, what people are saying: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

I'm sure the answers come as no surprise. The people are saying *lots* of things, the disciples tell him, and they share all the speculations, probably laughing and half-believing them at the same time. It's fun to consider all the possibilities. It's a wonder that Judas, as the group's treasurer, didn't start an office pool right then and there and give odds for each guess! Imagine a scene like this: "We've got Jesus as *Zechariah* reborn coming in at 15/1, Obadiah at 20/1, and the deathless Elijah as the slight favorite at 9/2!"

We're not told of Jesus' reaction to the rumors circulating all around – only that he's really more interested in what his disciples think. He knows they must be talking about it too: "But who do *you* say that I am?"

While the text doesn't explicitly say this, I can easily see a wonderfully pregnant pause after Jesus asks, as it only now sinks in that all the joking and guesses are over. It's time for a decision ... It's time for the truth ... It's time to declare one's allegiance. And I suspect that for just about all of them, no answers were coming.

"But who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks. Thank God for Simon Peter! It's impulsive, willing, stand-up and speak-up Peter who saves the moment and breaks the tension. Like he has shown

before and will again and again, he lets the words come out ... he's willing to put them out there, whether for praise, dismissal, or even ridicule: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

We're not told whether Peter had suspected this for a while, or if it comes to him in just this moment. But either way, it *is* an *inspired* answer – one that elicits from Jesus a deep enthusiasm, as if he is weary from holding the secret to himself for so long:

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. (Matthew 16:17-18, NRSV)

Jesus knows that this insight did not come from within Peter himself. It was a profound truth that could only be revealed from above – and then confessed by an astonished and grateful and *willing* vessel. As much as ever before, Peter said more than he knew, more than he could grasp or understand, but he spoke the truth. And that confessed truth on Peter's lips is enough for Jesus to make a play on his name. Early on, he had picked up his nickname Peter (Petros, in Greek), meaning "Rock", presumably for his personality and leadership capability. And now, hearing Peter's confession of faith, Jesus declares that this "Rock" (Peter's confession) is the foundation on which the church would be built.

And so, the secret is out. But Jesus knows that people aren't ready for it. It *is* the truth, but it is a *dangerous* truth, and so he insists that none of them tell anyone – not yet. The time isn't right. For he still has to go to Jerusalem and there suffer at the hands of the authorities, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. Of course, as it turns out, the disciples aren't ready for this truth either.

So unready, in fact, that in the verses immediately following, the "Rock" turns "rocky," takes Jesus aside, and tells him that he has to be wrong: "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." Jesus' response is swift and sharp, but necessary: "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

The fact that Peter's rebuke is partly motivated by his love for Jesus doesn't change the equally sure fact that Peter is now standing in the way of the truth – of what Jesus being Messiah finally means – and so is *denying* the very heart of that in which he has just professed his faith. Peter's heart is in the right place, but in confessing Jesus to be the Messiah, the Son of the living God, he said more than he knew, more than he could understand, and now it's painfully apparent.

It's a painful lesson the disciples will have to learn, but a necessary one: That the truth they must embrace, must speak, is a truth that requires more than just speaking, more than mere belief. *It is a truth into which they must live.* I suppose it would be convenient if Jesus' Lordship was something that could just be confessed and all be well ... merely spoken and all be satisfied. But that's not the deal. Confessing Jesus as Lord and Christ, as Savior, means then *following him*

where he leads, and in this way alone is the true meaning of his Messiahship – and the beauty and costliness of grace – discovered.

Like those first disciples, we would expect our Messiah to be an emblem of success, of effectiveness, of victory, and to look for our “salvation” in those places which make us feel safe, comfortable, and happy, and all the better if wrapped up in the packaging of religion. But Jesus, who had a certain way with words, made clear what truly confessing him as Messiah would entail:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?
(Matthew 16:24-26, NRSV)

Back when I was in college, I had a curious habit of taping little cards with quotes I liked all around my room – song lyrics ... inspirational stuff ... poetry ... nerdy aphorisms. Those were days of deep seeking. I had stopped going to church just a few months in, but I was looking – looking for something that I couldn’t express and hadn’t found.

Of all my cards, there was only *one* bible quotation – but one that remained up all the years I was there. It was *this* one. I have been haunted by it my whole life. It haunted me in all my seeking. And I am still haunted by it ... what it means to take up the cross ...

The life you would save is the life you lose. And the life you would lose is the life you save. This is *not* the wisdom of the world. You will not find this wisdom in any secular bookstore’s self-help section, and frankly, you would struggle mightily to find it in a Christian one.

Many years ago, I worked in a popular Christian bookstore for a while between churches, and while there, formed the distinct impression that God’s purpose in existing is to make us happy and successful! We all know of so-called “prosperity gospel” preachers who have turned such a message into a very lucrative industry. Claiming to speak in Jesus’ name, they say that if we just have enough faith, “name and claim” what we want, and diligently follow these seven or whatever Biblical Laws of Success, we can have the health, wealth, and prosperity of our dreams.

And of course, this all makes good sense in a consumer culture inundated by the drive to acquire more and more. The reason you’re unhappy is that you don’t have *this* ... It’s a message that’s easy to sell, but it isn’t the gospel. “What people don’t realize,” as the southern writer Flannery O’Connor once wrote, “is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross.” The life you would save is the life you lose. And the life you would lose is the life you save.

Of course, the times in which we live make this word even harder. So many of us are afraid and tired. *Literally* saving our lives is something we may think a lot about these days. Not since

those hard days immediately after 9/11 has the world been more aware of the threats which fill the air. Many of us feel on edge, as if the country we love is falling apart.

There is COVID-19 of course, but also chaos and division in the halls of power, and bitterness between neighbors. There are the open wounds of past and present injustice, and a willful blindness to it. There is the threat of violence in our streets, and a resurgent bigotry which has crawled up from the shadows. Often it feels like too much ... just too much.

And so why not “save” our lives by running away, by giving up, throwing in the towel, and retreating into the shells of our own concerns? Or alternately, why not just give up even trying to trust more, to reach out more, to seek healing? What difference will any of our good intentions make when one more word or act of hate tears us all apart even more? Why risk it if it will only come to nothing?

I believe the times are such that Jesus would have us say more than we know, more than we’re able to grasp, more than we’re able to understand, more even than we’re ready to follow:

To speak Faith even when we can’t seem to muster it ...

To speak Hope even when we don’t see it ...

To speak Love even when we don’t feel it ...

To confess the Lordship of Jesus even if we still shake off our crosses ...

He calls us to say more than we know,

first, because the world desperately needs to hear. The world *needs* words of faith, of hope, of love – perhaps now more than ever.

And second, because - by the grace of God – our confession may be transformed into conviction ... We say more than we know until we *do* come to know, to know fully, even as we have been fully known.

“Jesus, you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” In making this confession today we are praying that all our being and doing be defined by Christ himself, and so may we joyfully come to bear that cross by which we find our lives.

May this be our deepest longing and most desperate desire!

To the glory of God. Amen.