

August 27, 2017
Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost
Matthew 16:13-20

Dear friends in Christ,

Your pastor is gone today, and it's really not a big deal. It's not a big deal because I'm just a pastor; a pastor who happens to be your pastor here at Grace Lutheran Church in Houma, Louisiana. I'm the pastor here, but if a tropical storm were to hit the Yucatan Peninsula and sweep me out to sea, y'all would likely mourn my passing and celebrate my going to be with Jesus, but you'd soon have another pastor in this pulpit preaching the Gospel. Sure, I'm the pastor. But I'm not **THE** pastor—the one and only who can do this job.

This is why the profession of Peter is so profound and important. Jesus asks the disciples, “*Who do you say that I am?*” Peter answers on their behalf, “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*”

Jesus of Nazareth is not “a Christ,” one of the many “anointed ones” chosen for various services by God as priests, prophets, kings and judges. Jesus is **THE** Christ. The one and only; the singular seed promised to Eve in the Garden of Eden; the one and only one who would crush the head of the serpent whose temptation led the world into sin and brokenness.

That “the”, that definite article, makes all the difference in the world, because it means that there is only one; “the” one, Jesus Christ. As He Himself said, “*I am THE way, and THE truth and THE life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” Peter’s answer is right on the money and it is the truth that saves—a truth that can only be revealed by God!

Jesus responds, “*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the*

keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Jesus proclaims that on this truth—that Jesus is THE promised Messiah of God—Christ’s church is to be founded. Moreover, this church founded on Christ will steward the keys to heaven, issuing God’s forgiveness to the faithful penitent while barring those refusing to bring their sins under God’s grace.

But then Jesus does something kind of strange. Jesus does something He rarely does in any Gospel—confirm that He is indeed THE Christ. But He does it in the midst of making that precious bit of information a secret! *“Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.”*

Why??!! This is the news the entire world, and Israel in particular, has been waiting centuries upon centuries to hear! The Messiah has arrived and His name is Jesus of Nazareth! Why doesn’t this Jesus want that known?

Simply put: No one, not even His own disciples, would understand, could understand, until Christ’s cross and empty tomb. Jesus, apart from being dead and risen for the forgiveness of sins, will always be comprehended wrongly. When asked why He taught in parables, Jesus quoted Isaiah, *“Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.”* The disciples themselves struggle with receiving the truth of the resurrection even after seeing the risen Christ. It isn’t until the Holy Spirit comes in power at Pentecost that they truly understand and proclaim Jesus as THE Lord of heaven and earth who died and rose for the forgiveness of sins.

Yet still today, Jesus is being proclaimed and received as a Christ apart from His cross and empty tomb!

We all know there are shyster preachers out there proclaiming a prosperity Gospel or a social justice Gospel or just a plain old “feel-good” Gospel absent talk of sin, repentance and forgiveness—absent the cross. But here in our church family I’m more concerned that we who know and hear proper Law and Gospel not push our faith in Jesus toward our own agenda and in the process push the cross and tomb out of view.

I’ve spoken with any number of Christians who look to Jesus as the one who is supposed to cure their illness or fill their bank account or calm their marriage and family troubles or just make them happy. If you mention the forgiveness of sins and peace with God won by the cross the response is, “Yeah. Yeah. I know that, but what I really need is blah, blah, blah—earthly stuff.” This thinking seems real normal because we have earthly cares, many of which are about weighty matters that cause much consternation. But it can be spiritually dangerous.

If your highest concern is your failing health, the truth is that you can often find healing of illness through doctors and medical science. There’s a legitimate alternate savior out there—another Christ.

If your obsessing over money, there’s lots of ways to make money. Jesus isn’t the only way to escape poverty. There’s other avenues to save marriages and calm and heal relationships. There are many paths to follow toward social justice and changing the world. I’m sure your local pharmacist has an entire section of medications aimed at making you happy. If a hurricane has formed and is pounding Playa del Carmen this very moment, you can be sure I’m not only standing on the beach praying for Jesus to save me—there’s lots of ways to save yourself from a storm. If you’re looking for stuff of the world, there can be many Messiahs, Christs, Saviors to choose from.

Only Jesus of Nazareth, **THE** Christ, the son of the living God, has gone to death wearing the sins of all mankind that those sins would be paid for and put to death forever. Only Jesus of Nazareth, **THE** Christ, the son of the living God, has risen from death, gaining this same resurrection for all who follow Him in faith. Only Jesus of Nazareth, **THE** Christ, the Son of the living God, has baptized you into this death and resurrection, feeds you in His very risen body and blood and proclaims through His Word the forgiveness that bring you peace with Almighty God forever.

Be sure that first and foremost, Jesus of Nazareth is **THE** Messiah, your Messiah, and for the reason He died and rose for you—the forgiveness of your sins; to gain you peace with God, to give you perfect life forever. Then, sure, bring all that other lesser stuff to God in prayer. He loves you, and He is the God who does great things for you. You know this because He has already done the greatest thing for you; lived, died and risen that today's broken existence would be swallowed up by perfect life forever, and He always reigns as **THE** Christ, the Son of the living God.

Amen.