

**The 12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: August 27, 2017**

**Proper 16: Matthew 16:13- 20: *Who do YOU say that I am?***

**Preached**

**By**

**The Rev. John E. Higginbotham**

**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

**One of the most difficult aspects of Christian living is that we never know how or where or when God will act. We don't know exactly how God might help us, regardless of the time we spend in prayer. The God we worship and serve is a God who constantly surprises us. If anyone told me 12 years ago that I would leave the Roman Catholic Church, become an Episcopal priest and rector of a beautiful church by the sea in Tiverton with an inclusive, warm, welcoming, hospitable and loving congregation, I would have said they were crazy. This inability to predict God's movements can be very joyous and frustrating at times. Our Gospel reading from Matthew today looks at one aspect of this issue. It deals with the problem of getting what we want, only to discover that it's not exactly what we thought it would be. So, here is the story: For many months Jesus and the disciples have been in Galilee. Now**

they venture into the District of Caesarea Philippi, an area about 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus has been very busy healing the sick, feeding the hungry, teaching in parables, and proclaiming the good news of the love of God for all God's children. If opinion polls had been taken in those days, I'm sure Jesus would have had a very high approval rating at this point in his ministry. Large crowds were gathering to hear him preach. Still more folks were coming to him seeking healing in mind, body and spirit. But in spite of his apparent popularity, we get a sense that Jesus was troubled about something. Jesus knew that he was not exactly the kind of Messiah the people wanted and expected him to be. The very people he had been sent to save totally misunderstood his mission, his purpose in coming.

That's not an uncommon occurrence. People see things differently all the time. A priest, an archaeologist, and a cowboy were getting their first look at the Grand Canyon one day. The priest exclaimed, "Truly this is one of the glories of God!" The archaeologist commented, "What a wonder of nature this is!" And the cowboy said, "Can you imagine trying to find a lost steer all the way down there?" People see things differently.

The Messianic hope of the Jewish people was that a 'Royal Messiah,' a military Messiah would defeat the Romans in a very violent and vengeful

manner. It would be total destruction for the Romans and for their Jewish puppets, especially Herod's family. The Messiah would re-consecrate the land and re-establish the supremacy of Israel among the great nations of the world. But before this happened, the Prophet Elijah must return to herald the coming of the Chosen One.

So, Jesus had to somehow communicate to his disciples and others, who had such high hopes for him, that what he was offering was something completely different from what they expected. Jesus' followers did not and could not understand that to be the Messiah, God had sent him to be, he would have to sacrifice and suffer and, ultimately, die a cruel death. And so, one day Jesus invited his disciples to sit and rest awhile on a quiet hillside. Perhaps he came to this secluded place to prepare himself for the difficult days that lie ahead. It wouldn't be long now until he began the final journey to Jerusalem and Calvary. But this was also a time of testing for his disciples, perhaps even a time of self-evaluation for himself, a time of wondering if he was accomplishing what he had set out to do. So, Jesus asks his friends a question he had never asked them before. "Who do people say that I am?"

Most likely the disciples were careful in giving their answer. They didn't want to mention any of the bad things they must have heard folks say about Jesus.

**Instead they responded positively. "Well, Lord, we've heard lots of good things about you. Some people say you're the ghost of John the Baptist, and some even say that you're the reincarnation of Elijah himself, the greatest prophet in our history. That's pretty high praise, isn't it, Lord?" But Jesus didn't stop there. He wanted to know more. And so he asked this group of close friends, these who knew him better than anyone else, "Okay, now tell me who do YOU think I am." An awkward silence followed his question. They had no problem reporting what other people were saying about who Jesus was, but when it came to expressing their own innermost understanding of who he was, they weren't quite so eager to speak. After what must have seemed like a long time, Peter broke the silence, saying, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." I wonder if Peter really knew what he was going to say before he said it. He was awfully impetuous, you know? And I wonder if he understood the full meaning of "Messiah, Son of the Living God."**

**As I studied the Gospel story for this week, a strange thought entered my mind. As I read about the pop quiz Jesus sprung on his disciples, I wondered what would happen if, instead of preaching a sermon, I gave YOU a pop quiz. What if I had just read the Gospel and then passed out to each of you a pencil and a piece of paper with one question written on it: "Who do you say Jesus is?" How would you respond? In agreement with Peter, some of you may have**

written down the words recorded in Matthew's gospel for today, "Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Others might have echoed the words of Thomas, "Jesus is my Lord and my God." Still others might have written, "Jesus is the best friend I ever had." So, my brothers and sisters in Christ, who do YOU, say Jesus is?

Yes, Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, the second person of the Holy Trinity of God, our Lord and Savior, but what do these titles mean to us today? Maybe our answers would be more complete if we simply listed words that describe what we mean. Jesus is: loving, gentle, compassionate, merciful, understanding and forgiving. Jesus is: my helper, my guide, my friend, my God. Simply put, who is Jesus to you?

You know children have a wonderful ability for deeply religious concepts expressed in simple language. Here are just a few: "Will my dog go to heaven when he dies? If Jesus is up in heaven, how can he be here with us at the same time? My Grandpa never went to church with us before he died. Is he in heaven now? If heaven is up in the sky, how come the astronauts haven't seen it?" How would you answer their questions?

But we grownups also have questions of faith. Many of us have questions we want to ask God when we get to heaven, like these: If you really love the

**world, God, why is there so much hatred and suffering and pain? Why do some people starve to death while others have more food than they know what to do with? Why do people kill each other? Why are there earthquakes that kill thousands of innocent people and injure thousands more? Why did the love of my life die? Why did my innocent child die? I'm sure you could add to that list of questions.**

**I know a woman who lost her closest friend in an automobile accident last month. Last week, her teenage daughter came home drunk and half-dressed. On her way home from the hospital, after having a lump removed from her breast, this woman saw a bumper sticker that said, "Jesus is the answer." And she couldn't help thinking to herself, "Jesus is the answer to what, my loneliness, my feelings of failure as a mother, my fear of cancer? Exactly what is Jesus the answer to? And if Jesus IS the answer, then why are all these bad things happening to me? I'm a good Christian. Why, God?"**

**Sometimes in our haste to be messengers of the good news, we answer a little too quickly. As people of God, we feel that we need to know all the answers to questions of faith, when in reality we have trouble answering the one question that Jesus has asked his disciples for over 2,000 years, "Who do you say that I am?" And so, when questions of faith come up, we're tempted to give a short**

reply like, "Jesus is the answer," then change the subject as quickly as we can. If we say more than that, someone might realize that we don't have all the answers, and how would that look? So, who do you say Jesus is?

My sisters and brothers in Christ, the gift of faith places the confession on our lips, "Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Here is our challenge. Every day we struggle to understand exactly what that means when we're faced with the difficult questions of life, death and faith. When these questions arise in our lives, God doesn't expect us to have all the answers. We CAN confess our faith, but sometimes it's also okay to admit, "I just don't know the answer to that because I don't completely understand how God works. No one does. But I'm working on it. We all search for answers. But, for now, we see "through a glass, dimly," as St. Paul wrote. But someday, we will understand fully what it means to confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Until that day, we must continue our daily journey of faith, boldly and courageously taking one shaky step at a time. And we must not be afraid to ask questions or to admit that we don't have all the answers. For now, a disciple of Jesus Christ, must show up and be present to one another and the world.

**In June, I buried the wife of a dear friend. I see this man frequently because he is so distraught over the death of his beloved wife. Whenever we meet, he says, I prayed and prayed for her to live and for God to take me and spare her. She was a much better person than me. Why did God take my wife? I don't want to live anymore without her; the pain is just too much to bear. Why didn't God take me? Every morning, I wake up and I kiss the urn sitting on the mantle over the fireplace and I say, "Good morning my baby. I miss you," and then I cry and cry. The man is inconsolable and I have no answers to comfort him and ease his pain. You see my sisters and brothers in Christ, my friend does not keep coming back to me hoping that someday I will have the answers for him. He keeps coming back because I am present with him and I listen to him as he tells his stories. That is all we can do. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to be with one another and present in the good times, in the bad times, and in all those times in between. But, let me tell you what can be done. A few weeks ago, I received a call from a mutual acquaintance. She met this man in the market. She was very concerned and upset because he was crying and told her he wanted to die. So, I called him and told him I wanted to come to his house for a visit. When I arrived, I was delighted to hear him playing the piano. The door was open and I walked inside. He said that when he came home from the market he began dusting the**



**furniture. When he dusted the piano, he opened it and there was a songbook filled with his wife's favorite tunes. For the better part of an hour, I stood over his shoulder as he played. We sang along poorly and we laughed loudly.**

**When we were finished serenading each other, he pulled out his photo albums and reminisced of happier times. In the end, we shared stories about the wives we both lost. Both our first names are the same and our wives were Carols.**

**We had no answers. But, what we had was each other and that was enough, for now. AMEN.**