

Sermon on Matthew 16:13-20
12th Sunday after Pentecost, August 27, 2017
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

We've been on quite a road trip with Jesus this summer, haven't we? Over the past several Sundays, we have heard how Jesus took his disciples on a walking tour of the country north of their home province of Galilee, far away from Jerusalem, to tell parables, perform miracles, and meet fascinating people. Like the Canaanite woman whom we met last Sunday, when Jesus took his disciples into the region of Tyre and Sidon, which was in the province of Syria, the land of the Phoenicians, north of Galilee on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It was there in that region where Jesus was challenged by this Canaanite woman who demanded mercy for her demon-tormented daughter, and would not take "no" for an answer. Impressed by her persistent faith and by her insistence on being heard, Jesus healed her daughter. From there they passed along the northern side of the Sea of Galilee, where people brought many to Jesus who were sick, maimed, lame, and mute, to be healed. They were amazed to see "the mute speaking, the maimed made whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing." In his compassion for the crowd, Jesus once again fed 4000 men, plus all the women and children with them, with seven loaves and a few small fish. Once again, the people were amazed.

From there, Jesus led his disciples north once again, to a city called Caesarea Philippi, in the region ruled by one of King Herod's three sons: named Philip. (Remember, he was the one whose wife, Herodias, left him for his brother, King Herod Antipas, who had just had John the Baptist killed after Salome danced for him. Talk about a first family with issues!) Caesarea Philippi was a place where many foreign gods were worshiped, including the Canaanite god Baal. It had been known as Baniyas, after the Greek god Pan (half- man, half- goat and often depicted playing the flute. The city was built by a large rock cliff, near a stream of water which gushed out and became one of those forming the Jordan River. Philip had renamed the city Caesarea Philippi, for the Roman Emperor – Caesar Augustus - and for himself (as there was also a city named Caesarea on the Mediterranean coast). The cult of Pan had flourished there for over 200 years, and today you can still remnants of the Temple of Pan, with Pan's cave in the background, where Greeks had made sacrifices, calling it "The Gates of Hades". Got all that?

Enough of the geography lesson, but it is key to what happens next: when Jesus and his disciples arrive at this massive rock face where water gushed forth, and asked them: "*Who do people say the Son of Man is?*" Well, the disciples had heard a lot of things, like "John the Baptist", "Elijah", or "one of the prophets". So then Jesus asked, "*But who do YOU say that I am?*"

Good question. Probably no one wanted to say. They didn't want to give a wrong answer, so they remained silent. But Peter had an answer. He said, "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*" Good answer! The Son of Man was not like all of these foreign gods of the Greeks, who only existed in paintings or in statues of stone. Jesus was a living, breathing Messiah who walked and talked, whom they would follow to the ends of the earth!

So Jesus said, "*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 (Petros in Greek), and on this rock (Petra – the Aramaic word for rock which Jesus used) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.*" It was ironic, for Jesus to stand by the rock face of a city with so many gods, which symbolized the power of the Roman Caesar, ask who had the real power of God in this world (the Son of Man), and then commission one of his fisherman followers as "the rock upon which I will build my church". The irony is that he chose Peter, who was stubborn like a rock, but also prone to stumble – as we shall see next Sunday, when he rebukes Jesus for saying he would be arrested, suffer, and be killed, and Jesus called him "*a stumbling block*". He had also shown he could sink like a rock, when Jesus had walked on water and Peter tried to walk to him; he saw the waves, became afraid, sank and almost drowned. For those of you who enjoy puns and plays on words, this passage is rich in imagery and language. But no sooner than Peter had made his confession of Jesus' identity, Jesus sternly told his disciples to "*tell no one that he was the Messiah.*" It was not yet time.

Who do you say that I am? That is the question, isn't it? Fast forward 21 centuries to our context today. If you and I were to take a road trip across America, we could also see many impressive mountains, cliffs, and rock faces. We could also go to Washington D.C. and see many statues, monuments to presidents, generals, war heroes and famed leaders from our nation on the Washington Mall, and other places where heroes are remembered like ancient gods.

If we were to travel cross country to South Dakota, you can go to the Black Hills, still considered sacred by Native Americans, called *Paha Sapa* by the Lakota. Following the war in which white Americans stole the Black Hills from the Lakota, Cheyenne, and other Plains Indian tribes, one mountain known as The Six Grandfathers was renamed Mount Rushmore. The faces of the heroes of American democracy – four American presidents – Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and Teddy Roosevelt – were carved into the face of the mountain as a monument to white American conquest. It is now a famous tourist stop which two million Americans visit every year. But in these sacred mountains, where indigenous peoples for centuries have believed the Spirit of God our Creator dwells, it raises the question: who are these men whose faces are immortalized in the mountain, and what do they represent? And who do we say God is, who made this beautiful

country, and created us to live together in peaceful harmony? Have we made these American presidents “idols” to a different ideal that we cherish – namely, manifest destiny and the conquest of the weak at the hands of the powerful?

In recent weeks we have become concerned with other monuments, many in our southern states. We witnessed the violence in Charlottesville, Virginia, when white supremacists and Nazis organized a demonstration in Emancipation Park, supposedly to oppose the removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. They were met with a counter-demonstration by clergy and others opposed to white supremacy and racism, and we all know how that turned out. It was ugly in its violence, and marred by the death of a young white female demonstrator against the hate. The President gave mixed messages in response, and though more Confederate monuments are coming down, the controversy has heated up. Add to it the pardon of a sheriff in Arizona who had demonstrated racism as he racially profiled Latino immigrants, and had been convicted for the crime of abusing his power and mistreating prisoners. Now transgender citizens who serve our country faithfully and with honor have been threatened with expulsion from the armed forces by their Commander in Chief. This country has become a real mess!

In this context, it has become vitally important for Christians and the Church to be absolutely clear about our witness of who God is, *who Jesus is and what he stands for....who we are as Jesus' followers, and therefore, what WE stand for as the Church!* In these days of division, with hateful words being spoken out loud by many white Americans against Black people, Jewish people, Native people, immigrants (documented and undocumented), Muslims, and those with differing gender identities or sexual orientation, we must be crystal clear about who Jesus is and what he teaches us. If God is the creator of all people, then we must be clear that all human beings are children of God – and are our neighbors, our brothers and sisters, whom we are called to love and are worthy of just, equitable treatment. If Jesus is God's Son, who loves us so much that he has died for us, then we must clearly proclaim that Jesus loves all God's children, shows mercy to all, and call us to show loving mercy to one another in the same way – regardless of the color of their skin, their language and culture, their religious or political beliefs.

This is all, of course, terribly difficult for us to do in such divisive times, when people have become so angry with others who disagree with them. Most of us are not used to confronting such divisiveness or hate, and have not been taught to “speak up”. We may remain as mute as the disciples were when Jesus asked them who he was. Or we are as prone to stumble as Peter did, who made a bold confession which he didn't fully understand, as he proved many times. We are seldom confident enough to say out loud what we stand for, or what we believe.

Back in the days of rising Nazism just before World War II, many Christians in Germany admired Adolf Hitler, were afraid to oppose him, or just kept quiet.

But there was a group of German Christians who became the *Confessing Church*, to publicly state their opposition, and what they believed in. They protected Jews, and others in danger. Many of them didn't survive, but their words live on.

There are Lutherans today in America who propose that this is the time for us to speak up, who wrote a *Statement of Lutheran Clergy Rejecting White Supremacy, Terrorism and Violence*. I have signed it. The gist of it is this: "We the undersigned, as Lutheran pastors and other Lutheran leaders who believe that God's grace is for 'all tribes and peoples and languages,' publicly condemn white supremacy as well as terrorism of every kind." Now, we recognize that we are not perfect witnesses – for in North America, some Lutherans supported slavery of African Americans, white supremacy and oppression of Native Americans. Our history and our hands are not clean. Nevertheless, "as leaders of Christian communities whose Lord has commanded that we care always for 'the least of these', we pledge our support to those who are oppressed because of their faith, race, ethnicity, gender, disability, or sexuality. When God declares God's love for the world in John 3:16 it is for the *whole* world...so we call upon all leaders – religious, civic and corporate – to speak out in the clearest of terms to oppose racism, bigotry, and violence whenever and wherever it may happen." We must speak clearly about God's mercy and love for all people, for when we remain silent, the whole nation suffers – indeed, the entire world suffers. And our deeds must match our words. For though in ourselves we are weak and may stumble often, through faith in Jesus Christ we stand on the solid rock of God's truth.

So we take seriously today Jesus' question: *who do you say that I am?* If Jesus is who we say he is, the Son of God, the Messiah, our Savior and our Lord, what does this mean for how you live your life in this world, what you say and what you do?

Who do YOU say that I am? I hope you say "Jesus is my Lord!" God help us. Amen.