

Proper 16A 2017 Sermon

Matthew 16:13-20

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.

Some of our students returned to school this past week, so it seems appropriate that the Gospel lesson assigned for today centers around a pop quiz that Jesus poses to his disciples (the word “disciple,” after all, means “student”). Jesus asks his students: “Who do you say that I am?”

Simon is the one who speaks up – and he gets it right! Nails it. “You are the Messiah,” he responds, “the Son of the living God.” Simon earns an “A+” and gets to move to the head of the class. And as an added honor, Jesus bestows upon him a new name: Peter – Rock. Jesus calls him “blessed,” and gives him the keys to the kingdom of heaven!

All because Peter got it right. Because that’s what Jesus wants: that we get it right.

At least that’s the way we *usually* understand this story.

But I think that common interpretation misses the mark. You see, I don’t think this is a story about getting it right. I think it’s about being open to God.

Now, Jesus is a very different kind of teacher. If he were teaching a college-level course, it would be a practicum titled, “How to live a life in God’s Spirit.” Jesus is not teaching his students **facts** that he wants them to memorize, like a history teacher might quiz her students on events and dates; nor is he like a math teacher challenging his students to come up with the right answer to a math problem. Jesus is not looking for right answers to factual questions. He is looking to transform lives.

If we examine today’s Gospel closely, we see that Jesus doesn’t commend Simon for knowing the right answer; he commends him for being open to God. “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! **Because** flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. [And you, Simon, were open to receiving

that revelation.]” Simon gets no credit for *knowing* the answer; God the Father **gave** him the answer. Jesus blesses him for being **open** to the mind and spirit of God, who reveals the Truth to **all** who are open to it. It is only after Simon has been open to, and enlightened by, God that he can tell Jesus, “You are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

But stating that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, is not the **end** of the matter – it is just the beginning! “Peter has **said** more than he *knows*,” notes Fr. John Shea, “and Jesus is instructing him in the implications of what he has said... Peter has seen and acknowledged the identity and mission of *Jesus*, and now **Jesus** is [shifting the focus back to Peter and...] the identity and mission of *Peter*. The two are intimately linked together.”¹ The identity and mission of Jesus and the identity and mission of Peter are intimately linked together. At the beginning of today’s Gospel, Jesus refers to himself as the “Son of Man;” *then Peter* identifies Jesus as the “Son of the Living God.” Both are true. What Jesus wants Peter to realize is that **his** identity, *also*, is **both**: Son of Man **and** Son of God, human and divine.

Now, some of you may object to this statement, saying, “But Mark, the Nicene Creed itself says that Jesus is the **ONLY** Son of God!” Unfortunately, the English translation of the Creed which we use in our worship is misleading, for it leaves out an important word found in the Creed in its original language. In its original form, the Nicene Creed does **not** say that Jesus is the only son of God; rather, it says that Jesus is the “*only-begotten*” Son of God² – which means that there may be **many** sons and daughters of God, but only one eternally-*begotten* Son of God, the pre-existent Christ, the Word who was in the beginning with God, and became flesh (John 1). (If you remember the Christmas Carol, “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” you know that one of the verses speaks of “*only-begotten* Son of the Father.”) There are *many* references in the Bible to **our** being children of God, sons and daughters of God. St. John, in his First Letter, states, “we are already children of God;”³ and St. Paul writes, “The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we **are** God’s children. And if we are children, then we are heirs: heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ...”⁴ When I mix the water with the wine at the Offertory at Holy Communion, I say, “As the co-mingling of this water and this wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.” The 2nd-Century Saint Irenaeus said that God “became what we are in order to make us what he is himself.” And lest we think Irenaeus was some singular radical, St. Athanasius, St. Clement of Alexandria, and St. Augustine – all *universally* recognized Fathers of the Early Church – said almost identical things. The Fourth Century Saint Athanasius, who deserves a good deal of the *credit* for our Nicene Creed, wrote, “...the Son of God became human so that we might become God.”⁵ We share in the divine nature – “heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ”! The Eastern Orthodox Churches puts great emphasis on becoming Christ (they call it *theosis* or *divinization*),⁵ while we Western Christians, with the notable exception of mystics and contemplatives, have more often than not kept Christ external to us, at arms’ length, and have worshipped

him, as it were, from afar. One significant exception is C.S. Lewis, who wrote in his book *Mere Christianity*: “Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else.” Knowing your Bible like the back of your hand or having memorized Luther’s Small Catechism or having a PhD in Theology or worshipping God with great fervor and emotion means nothing if you are not yourself becoming a little Christ. “It is no longer I who live,” writes St. Paul, “but it is Christ who lives in me.”⁶ Paul was becoming a little Christ.

And in the end, **that’s** what Jesus wants for his followers: not that we know all the facts and have all the right answers, but rather that we live a life **in Christ** (one of Paul’s favorite phrases), a life which embodies in ourselves Jesus’ love of neighbor and love of enemy; a life which incarnates in ourselves Jesus’ priority concerns for the poor, sick, hungry, marginalized, and outcast; a life which draws its energy from a vital, open connection with the Living God. That’s what it means to be a son or daughter of God.

Ant **that’s** what all the talk about the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” is about! Jesus isn’t assigning Peter the role of bouncer at the Pearly Gates; rather, in the words of John Shea, having the keys to the metaphorical gates of the kingdom of Heaven means that “Peter and the disciples... can open heaven so its power and energy flow into earth...”⁷ The keys are all the ways we can open the gates of our mind, soul, and spirit to God and God’s kingdom, bringing into reality the prayer, “Thy kingdom come... on earth as in heaven.”

The truth is, my friends, Jesus does not withhold the keys of the kingdom of heaven from *anyone* seeking that intimate connection between God and human, heaven and earth. “Do not be afraid,” Jesus says in Luke’s Gospel, “...for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.”⁸ God *delights* in giving the keys of the kingdom to **anybody** who desires them! So let’s get rid of all the jokes and cartoons about Peter being the gatekeeper at the Pearly Gates; they only perpetuate the misguided idea that the kingdom of Heaven is restricted to a select, morally pure few. **Each** of us will be given the keys if we desire and ask for them – given the means to open the gates to the kingdom of heaven so its power and energy flow into – and through – our lives! Each of us **is** Simon Peter: sometimes stubborn, often clueless, at times opposing Jesus (as we will see in next week’s Gospel), capable of denying Jesus three times; but also at times open and receptive to the kingdom of God which Jesus says is right here, at hand; open to the power and energy and wisdom which flow from our Father in heaven, who opens our eyes to divine truth, empowers our lives with his Spirit, and says to each of us, “You, too, are my son, my daughter, my rock, my blessed one, to whom I *delight* to give the keys of my kingdom! Take them, and open!”

AMEN

¹ John Shea, *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, p. 258

² Interestingly, the OLD Prayer Book translation of the Nicene Creed – an option in Rite I (see *Book of Common Prayer* p. 327, at bottom) – has “the only-begotten Son of God”. Compare the International Consultation on English Texts (ICET) version on p. 326 with the old translation on p. 327.

³ 1 John 3:2

⁴ Romans 8:16-17

⁵ see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divinization_\(Christian\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divinization_(Christian))

⁶ Galatians 2:20

⁷ *Shea*, p. 259

⁸ Luke 12:32