
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – August 23, 2020

Lectionary Readings: [Isaiah 51:1-6](#) • [Psalm 138](#) • [Romans 12:1-8](#) • [Matthew 16:13-20](#)

You Are the Messiah

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The Twelve had seen, heard, and experienced a great deal over the course of their time with Jesus. They had witnessed the healings and heard the teachings of Jesus. But they also had encountered the opposition of the religious leaders. They were caught up in all the political cross-currents that resulted from Roman occupation and rule, and the harsh inequalities perpetuated by that rule. They experienced the fervor of the crowds coming out looking for a savior.

It was a crazy time. Not too unlike today.

It's in the midst of all of this that Jesus does kind of a gut-check with the Twelve. First, he asks them what people are saying about him. Who do they say that I am? And they tell him: some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, some say one of the prophets.

And then he turns to them and asks the same question. Simon immediately responds, you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Jesus rewards this expression of faith by renaming and commissioning Simon. You are Peter (Petros), and upon this rock (petra), I will build my church.

The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. What you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.

Wow, it's a powerful and stirring moment.

One that has also contributed to a triumphal view of the Church.

That view is reflected in today's Collect. I actually cringed a bit as I read it: "Grant, O merciful God, that

your Church, being gathered together in unity by your Holy Spirit, may show forth your power among all peoples." Is it power we should be showing forth? "Blessed are the meek."

But isn't that what Matthew would have us believe?

Sadly, that triumphal reading can lead to real harm, as we've seen over the centuries.

We recently spent a couple of weeks in our Adult Forum talking about the historic connection between the Episcopal Church and native communities in Minnesota. Bishop Whipple and the other early leaders were motivated to bring the Gospel to the native communities. But the work got caught up in the confusion between bringing white culture and the Spirit of God. While native communities benefited, they also suffered.

So with that in mind, I thought it would be good to go deeper with the passage. Is it as triumphal as it sounds? Is it really meant to depict a powerful church on the march, or something quite different?

Thinking about this, it occurred to me that the reading from Romans is talking about some of the same things, but in a different way. Then I thought maybe we could host a conversation between Paul and Matthew, and see what insight might come from that.

Let's start with Matthew:

Jesus asks, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

It sounds like Simon is making a creedal or doctrinal statement. And it does express truth about who Jesus is. But is that what's really going on? Is that all that's going on?

Let's check in with Paul:

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

Isn't that what Simon Peter is doing here. Presenting himself to Jesus, giving over his life. This isn't just a creedal affirmation, it's an emotional giving of his heart and self. In the midst of all the swirl, in the midst of all the other callings and distractions, Peter has chosen his path. Peter names Jesus as the Messiah he will give his life to.

And in Matthew, we hear how Jesus responds:

"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."

But what has been revealed from the Father? Some hidden wisdom? What has Peter come to know and see that he didn't know or see before?

So let's let Paul speak to this:

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Here's what Paul is saying. When we offer ourselves, something happens to us.

When we chose not to be conformed to the world, God transforms and renews us, so that we discern the will of God. This is the gift of faith that can only come from the Father in heaven. This, I believe, was Peter's experience. In the act of giving himself, he came to know God's purpose for him. He was transformed.

Let's keep going. In response to Peter's confession, You are the Messiah, In Matthew's Gospel (and only in Matthew's Gospel) Jesus says this:

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."

These two sentences have been pivotal for how those of us in the Catholic tradition have come to understand the Church and its authority. I was ordained as a priest in the apostolic tradition going back to Peter. The institution has derived much of its authority from the promise that whatever is bound on earth will be bound in heaven. These two sentence can breed a pretty triumphal view of the Church and the power of the Church.

But is Jesus saying something more or different here? After all, there was no institutional Church when Jesus spoke these words to Peter. In fact, the word for church, *ekklesia*, can be more accurately translated as community.

Let's go back to hear what Paul has to say about the Church.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.... For as in one body we have many parts, and not all the parts have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

The Church quickly became, and continues to be an institution, but Paul is pointing to something deeper here about what it means to be Church

Those of us who, like Peter, have given ourselves to Christ, who have taken that leap of faith to let go of the old world and embrace the promise of a new world, are joined not only to Jesus, but to one another. We are members of one another. We are a Beloved Community.

In Matthew, Jesus speaks about the work of the Church to bind and loose on earth. This is really important, because we are called to do God's work in the world around us. We pray, "May thy Kingdom come on earth, as in heaven." But, what does that look like? Is Jesus speaking to some institutional power to set the rules?

Let's hear what Paul has to say about the work we are called to.

He writes: “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.”

He goes on to explain that as members of the Body of Christ, we are to offer our gifts in service to others according to the grace we have received. I don't think this is about institutional power, but rather about service. It means, some may teach, some may prophecy, some may give, some may lead. It means, according to the grace given us, some may be called to bind up the broken-hearted. Some may be called to loosen the bonds of oppression.

But all our work, if we are faithful, is done as members of the Body of Christ and is accomplished through God's grace.

We are at an important time in the life of the Church, big C, and our faith community. We are beginning to own our history as a part of systems that have oppressed. We are learning that we don't have all the answers or the corner on wisdom. We're also beginning to discover all the gifts that we share amongst us, according to the grace each one of us has received. We are beginning to imagine the new work God may be calling us to.

I hope this conversation between Paul and Matthew has given us a deeper way to understand the confession Peter made. It's not about triumph and power.

When we proclaim of Jesus, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” let it mean for us that you are the one we give ourselves to, you are the one who transforms us, you are the one whose grace sustains us, you are the one who calls and empowers us to serve, you are the one whose footsteps we follow as we walk the Way of Love.

Amen.