

## **Matthew 16:13-20: Profession & Affirmation**

### **Introduction:**

Today we enter the region of Caesarea Philippi with Jesus and the Twelve. It's a city north of the Sea of Galilee; today it's just an archaeological site, abandoned.

Matthew tells us that, as Jesus entered the suburbs, he stopped, paused, and asked his disciples a question.

Today we're talking about that question, and the answer that the disciples give. It's a passage full of language that needs explained, and expectations that need unwrapped. We'll talk about these--I hope we'll talk about them both really quickly, and really well. Let's pray for that.

### **Prayer:**

#### **Who do they say...?**

It starts like this:

**13 When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" 14 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."**

The big point we should make is that Jesus isn't John

the Baptist. He isn't Elijah. He isn't Jeremiah, or one of the prophets of long ago who has, somehow, come back to life.

But the guesses aren't too far off base, because he acts a little bit like these prophetic people.

The prophets do things, right? They speak to God's People about the ways that His people have been unfaithful to their covenant obligations. And they call God's People back to those obligations. Israel, the People of God, were in a special covenant relationship with God, something like a marriage that offered them enormous blessings along with enormous responsibility. There were things expected of them in this special relationship the same way, in marriage, things are expected of marriage partners. And like a prophet does, Jesus calls them back to their obligations. He's constantly going around talking about what God expects of People who want to be His People. Much of what we've seen in Matthew recently is Jesus pushing people to realize their responsibility to the world outside Israel.

The prophets model God's provision for people. They feed them, take care of them, help them, teach them, heal them. Jesus does all this. They are agents of God; deputized, set apart, for God's special work. They occasionally speak in riddles, which means only those who really care enough to pay close attention

understand. They let people know that God's Judgment and Reward are on the way, and will happen sooner than they think.

Jesus is like a prophet; he's like Elijah, he's like John the Baptist. He's like Jeremiah. But he's unlike them, too. And so he pushes against the disciples' response.

***Who do you say...?***

***15 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" 16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."***

Peter speaks for the group, here. Jesus has been using plurals: "What about you all all?" "Who do you all say I am?"

"The Messiah," Peter answers. "The Christ" some of our translations read. Messiah and Christ mean the same thing: "anointed one." Messiah is Jewish; Christ, Greek. To "anoint" is smear or pour oil on someone, and in that pouring, that smearing to set that person apart, confer upon that person some special status or special job or role.

The Messiah was a person has been set apart for a purpose that only the Messiah could do, and anointed not with oil, but with God's own Spirit, filled with God's own Spirit: Power so creative and loving it has its own

personality. There were all sorts of expectations about who and what this Messiah would do that were floating around during Jesus' time, and expectation that he would come soon was at a fever pitch when Jesus arrived. John wasn't the only one preaching "The End is Near!" in the desert; he was just the only one who was right.

And when the Messiah would show up, he would usher in all the promises God had made to Israel: that they would bless the world, that the world would acknowledge who God is, worship God in Spirit and Truth. The Messiah would speak for God in a way that no prophet had before. He would release God's People from oppression--political and spiritual oppression. The Messiah would embody all the ideal qualities of covenant faithfulness, and be a role model, but more than a role model: the ideal Israelite, the ideal human being.

Now: there was no way Jesus could fulfill every expectation about the Messiah, because of course, God doesn't meet everyone's expectations. For example, Jesus dies and comes back to life. Not a common expectation of the Messiah. He takes the promise that God's People would be restored to the land God gave them, and instead he sends them out into the whole world to tell everyone that God's Kingdom has arrived all over. No one expected Christmas.

When Peter says that they think Jesus is the Messiah, they recognize that in him God's power and capability and authority exist in a way that they don't in anyone else. He's something no one has ever seen before. To call him "The Son of the Living God" is to point to the way God is not only active in the world, active in Israel's life, but active especially and uniquely through Jesus. Peter's declaration is worship, radical and unexpected. That's part of why what he says has echoed through history.

***Forced To Ask:***

And this passage forces us to ask ourselves, as Matthew's readers, a question--one I'll mostly let sit for now:

Who do we say Jesus is? Who do you say Jesus is? And more than "say" what do our actions reveal about who we believe Jesus is?

A role model? A well-meaning whacko? Someone who may teach us about God, but definitely isn't--and you can see it by how cavalier we are with what he asks of those who follow him. Is Jesus Lord or Savior or Christ--whatever we mean by those things.

Who is Jesus? And however it is we respond, our real answer is usually revealed by where our time, and our treasure, and our talents go. It's revealed in our patience or impatience, in our attention or inattention,

in our willingness to change our mind about almost anything, if to change is to line ourselves up with God more perfectly.

### ***Peter rocks!***

Jesus replies to Peter's answer in a pretty powerful way. Here's what he says:

***17 ...“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. 18 And I tell you that you are Peter,[b] and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades[c] will not overcome it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be[d] bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be[e] loosed in heaven.”***

Let's walk through this passage, because it raises questions that have been a part of the history of the Church since, oh, since we got political clout, really.

### ***v17:***

Jesus says, ***17 ...“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.***

We can read this and be confused, because it seems like Peter ought to be able to get who Jesus was, given all the proofs and hints and, you know, *everything* that

Jesus has said and done. And yet, as far as Jesus is concerned, no one could understand he was God if God hadn't enabled it.

The truth is that before the Spirit was set loose in the world by Jesus, set loose in the Church and revealed as the Church build's and bears witness to God's Kingdom, before all this happened, those who were around just didn't see Jesus for who he was--not many of them, anyway. That only seems incredible because of where we stand and what we ourselves already believe.

And we should recognize that conviction about who Jesus is, even today, is the work of God. Repentance, ownership of Jesus' identity as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, and what that means for those who trust his words--that's something that comes from God. And Peter didn't even have the New Testament to lean on, you know? If we think our most clever arguments and our best presentations of the Gospel can convince people, we'll be convincing them, but not, I think, of who Jesus is, so much as of our presentation and argumentative excellence. Now: If what we're seeking is to be faithful to both the Spirit and Scripture as we engage with people, then God honors that and often uses our faithfulness to do amazing things. But insight into who Jesus truly is a miracle every time it happens.

And maybe Peter responded because no one else did; maybe he didn't respond as the Twelve's spokesperson. Regardless, Jesus highlights Peter as the one who has supernatural, God-given insight in this moment. He speaks to Peter, now, a singular "you," not a "you all."

### **v18: Overview**

***18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.***

Jesus renames Simon. He calls him Peter. Matthew, who is writing after this scene, has called him Simon Peter since we first met him, of course, and some of us regularly forget that Peter's name ever was Simon.

Peter means "rock" in Greek; and Jesus says that "on this rock I will build my church."

### **v18: Peter or his Profession?**

And questions come into play, here. Is Jesus saying "On Peter--the person--he'll build his church?"

This is how this has been historically read by the Roman Catholic Church, because--and the records are pretty good here--Peter became the leader of the Church in Rome. And so the Vatican has read the passage this way, and at times claimed that Jesus himself established for Roman Catholicism a certain

legitimacy that other organized groups of Christians simply don't have, because they aren't "by way of Peter," even if that argument is a hard one to make if you're tracing things through history. This perspective simply isn't as in play as much as it used to be, partially, simply, because it's a difficult claim to make, and Roman Catholicism has, in the past fifty years particularly, moved beyond this way of reading this passage.

Many Christians, unsurprisingly, disagree with a Peter-centered way of reading this. They'd say that it's Peter's profession, his declaration that Jesus "is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God," upon which Jesus intends to build his church. "This Rock" Isn't Peter. Simon is named "Rock" because he gave voice to the "rock" that is Jesus' real identity. Look, I'm on this side of things. The side that believes it's the truth that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, that is at the heart of the Church. If I didn't, I'd be Catholic, right? And, like, a really dogmatic one. And for me to say that the Church is built on Jesus' real identity as Israel's long awaited Messiah, the Son of the Living God, that's not weird, is it? It just makes sense. If not for Jesus, there'd be no Church.

### ***v18: The Church!?!***

But did we notice that Jesus talks about the Church here? Did we see this? The Church doesn't exist yet, you know? It didn't exist until after Jesus' death and

resurrection and the coming of the Spirit. Only in Matthew does Jesus talk about the Church to come. We see Jesus preparing the Twelve for the idea of a community that will be built around him and his authoritative teaching as God's Messiah. That community will be bigger than the tiny Twelve around him, more permanent.

So permanent, in fact, that "the gates of Hades will not overcome it." What Jesus says here doesn't affirm or deny any view of the afterlife. To say "the gates of Hades [that is, the place of the dead] will not overcome" the Church, is to say, simply, that the Church won't die out. The Church won't come to an end. Death won't triumph over the church, any "force" that leaves death's "gates" won't overcome it. Matthew's congregation needed to hear this encouragement; the Twelve will need to remember this as they get chased around and killed. Throughout history, in times of harassment, persecution, and anxiety, the Church has needed to hear this. I don't know if we, in our place and time in the world, need to hear it now or not.

Jesus continues:

**v19: Overview**

***19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be[d] bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on***

***earth will be[e] loosed in heaven.”***

Jesus is communicating power and authority. He uses the metaphor of locking something up or letting something free. He says “I will give you”--I, with others, read this as a statement to the Church--“the keys of the Kingdom.” And “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you set free on earth will be set free in heaven.”

When we read “heaven,” Jesus is talking about the realm, the plane of existence, the place where God’s Kingdom, God’s reigning power, is fully expressed. We pray “May your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven,” because we want God’s power as fully expressed on earth as it is in the heavens, God’s heavenly, spiritual realm. It overlaps our world, it crashes against our world, it intrudes upon us, but we know that God’s Kingdom isn’t fully realized on earth. Kingdom hasn’t Come, not entirely; it will when Jesus returns, and sets the world right, and sin and evil are judged, and found wanting. And we know that as Christians our citizenship--or allegiances and responsibilities--are to God’s Kingdom over any other earthly one.

***v19: What does this mean?***

So what does Jesus mean? What sort of power is Jesus giving to us? We have power to jail or set free; but what is that power over?

What I think he's talking about here is the very real truth that the Church will be given his task in the world. Right now, as he talks to his disciples, it's only him who holds the Kingdom Keys, you know? He's the one with all the information, with all the access to God, with all the power and freedom and responsibility. But we've seen him inviting the Twelve in: "You will be children of God," he's said. "To you the secrets of the Kingdom of Heaven have been given."

I think Jesus is letting the Twelve know that the Church is going to take on the task that he has. And it's not a responsibility that they'll be able to ignore. To be a part of the Church will mean we're engaged in this setting free or binding up activity, whether or not we want to be.

We could call this our stewarding activity, in the most literal sense. A steward kept the keys to their master's household. They were expected to have the best interests of the household at heart, to use their power and authority in a responsible way. Just as Jesus has been stewarding God's redemptive plan for the world by way of Israel, Jesus invites us into it, and says that this task of his will be ours, and our authority will be like his. When we've been at our worse, we've been gatekeepers, keeping out anyone who we don't consider worthy. When we've been at our best, we've been the stewards who act with their master's best interests at heart, and try to keep the integrity of our

master's household.

Jesus uses this same exact phrase just a little bit later, again when he talks about the Church--which again is unusual. It's in chapter 18. He's talking about how to address any sin in the Church; it's a passage that talks about the power Jesus gives the Church, and is followed by a parable about just how often we ought to forgive one another.

And by linking sin and forgiveness and the pursuit of reconciliation to this reminder that the Church will have authority to set free or imprison, I think Jesus is again doubling-down on the way our power is not a power to keep people out; it's a power to responsibly be like our master. We gather people to God in ways that line up with Jesus as we've seen him. Fundamental to our stewardship responsibility is to exercise our power the way Jesus exercised his.

***v19: Ominous Reality:***

And here is how the Church has historically, has traditionally, exercised this authority that Jesus gives us in this passage. Rather than lean into the great responsibility we have as Kingdom Key Keepers, Stewards who ought to live up to what our Master expects of us, and so be like him in all the places we go, healing, blessing, reconciling as much as we're able and embodying the work and care of our master as much as we can, we've instead sought to keep

people away from us and out of the Church, scared the way the Pharisees were scared that we'd become dirty on account of their imperfection. Rather than focus on the stewardship emphasis and reconciliation efforts Jesus outlines when he says this line, we've focused on our ability to draw lines around ourselves and cut ourselves off from those who threaten our perception of what gives us integrity.

We've excluded people from ourselves. Excommunicated them. Banned them from Communion, especially, from fellowship generally, but any of those things that we in The Brethren Church would call ordinances and some other ways of being Christian would call Sacraments.

The very real truth is that the Church is meant to be the community of people who are becoming like Christ. If we ourselves, as people who have been baptized into the Church, joined it through promise and prayer and in conviction, decide to act in every way but Christ's way, and we won't give that up, then the only thing the Church can ultimately do is leave us to our own devices, and hope and pray and love us until we come back to our senses and the Lord.

We're going to talk more about this in a couple of chapters, so I won't get into it much now, but I just want us to think about this: If to be a part of the Church is to be a part of the People who will be saved

when Jesus returns--if the Church is really a salvation people--then what happens when you've used your very great power of choice to put yourself outside it? What happens when you've doubled-down on some evil thing, resisted reconciliation with others, and have been asked to leave the Church until you can make the often personally costly choices to gather into it again? To be a part of the Church is to say no to some things, even as we say yes to the power and responsibility in the world we have.

Jesus will go on in Matthew to outline how to protect the integrity of the Church even as we protect the honor and personhood of each member of it. We'll talk about it soon.

But when Jesus lays out the truth that we are going to be given some measure of his authority in the world, then what we ought to emphasize is how pressing our responsibility is to act for Christ, like Christ, in Christ, rather than emphasize our ability to draw up the same exclusive boundaries around ourselves that the Pharisees so cleverly, thoughtfully, and faithlessly drew up.

***Summary:***

In the end, today's passage is ominous. It seems...scary, that anyone should have anything like the power Jesus gives here. But Jesus doesn't give anyone the power he has; he gives it to, well, to all of

us, to all those who follow him, to the Church as a whole.

And I don't think that any one congregation, any one denomination, any one way of being Christian is the gatekeeper of God's salvation. Hear me: There are better and worse ways of following Christ; there are better and worse theologies to live by, better and worse habits and practices that are called "Christian." We can disagree, even among ourselves, as to these, and yet love, we know, "covers over" not only a "multitude of sins" but of disagreements about what's best, too.

Yet to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God is to accept all that we know to be true of Jesus this side of Scripture and the Spirit. He is the one who is, who was, and who is on his way. He's the one who died and rose again. He's the one who calls us to become like him by His Spirit, and to say with Paul "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

### ***Conclusion: Overwhelming***

The biggest take away from today's passage is that we ought to be a little more impressed with how huge our responsibility to act like Jesus really is. It might not be

bad to let that bleed just to the edge of “being overwhelmed,” frankly.

Because we are his agents in the world, meant to steward what he stewarded. It would be an impossible task, this key-holding task, except that forgiveness, mercy, and love help make it bearable until his return.

And if we’ve been a part of the Church at all, we’ve experienced the blessing that comes when people embrace what we’ve embraced, discover what we’ve discovered about how much God loves them, and join with us in revealing it to the world. We may have also experienced the blessing of reconciliation, of turning our back on sin and behavior that shrinks our capacity to love, of seeing old hurts and wounds give way to peace. And we’ve maybe seen the heartache that comes when those we’ve loved and walked with have turned their backs on the Lord, even though the Church has sought to bless them as much as we’re able.

### ***Conclusion: Who?***

To remember our responsibility in the world, our authority as the Church, and the power we have that we must use well, is to say with Peter that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. It’s to keep it in mind, because we all, at least in this congregation, have a voice into how we live together, what we say and do with our congregational life.

And yet, of course, we go our separate ways before we're called back together. So who do we, each of us then, say Jesus is? And when do we say it? And how? Jesus told the Twelve to keep what was declared a secret; that time of secret-keeping is long past, and for us there is no such thing as a private faithfulness.

When was the last time you took stock of what you believe about this Christ, this one whose birthday we're celebrating in just a few days, whose return we're considering through the season of Advent, this one who we've pinned our hopes on?

Let's continue to declare who Jesus is by word and by deed, by what we say and what we do with ourselves, as the Church who God has blessed us to be. I pray we can always seek to be of one mind, sympathetic, loving, compassionate, and humble. I pray we can take seriously the responsibility the Church has to continue Jesus' reconciling, peace-making, hopeful work on earth.

And as we act as stewards of God's Kingdom, I pray we can do so with hope, faith, and joy, but most especially with love. The sort of love that Jesus modeled for us, commanded of us, and revealed as the deep heart of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is patient, kind; it doesn't envy or boast; it isn't proud or self seeking; it doesn't dishonor others, keeps us from quick anger even as it keeps no record of wrongs.

“Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”

And we're love's stewards, called at Christmastime and Advent-time and all the time to help each other and world live up to Jesus' example for us, no matter how hard that calling might, now and then, be, and what it might, now and then, ask of us.