

Pentecost 12, 8.23.2020

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Isaiah 51:1-6; Psalm 138; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

“Who do you say that I am?”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Has anyone ever told you that you are a “chip off the old block?” At some point, we’ve either said it or heard it. In my experience, these are overwhelmingly positive words. They are meant to say that the “stuff” of which we are made is strong and reliable. Yet it may seem sort of strange to use this metaphor about people, after all, we are flesh and blood, living and breathing beings – not made of stone.

In today’s first reading, Isaiah writes, “*Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn.*” With these words Isaiah is encouraging us to look to our spiritual ancestors, people like Abraham and Sarah, the father and mother of faith. I think this also means remembering people in our lives who modeled faith for us - perhaps it was a parent, a grandparent, a friend, or a co-worker. Someone has been a rock of faith in our lives, helping shape and polish us, so that with faith we are able to “*pursue righteousness.*”

In other words, someone modeled faith in Christ for us. Someone confessed Jesus as the Christ, someone demonstrated mercy, justice, and love for us so that we would also be modeled upon this rock of faith. All of us have someone who has been a rock of faith in our lives.

In today’s gospel Jesus teaches his disciples with two questions. The first is a very general question: “*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*” Jesus was asking his disciples to report to him about what people were saying about him. It’s a good question and there have been many books written in answer to it. For example, H. Richard Niebuhr’s modern classic *Christ and Culture*, describes Christ at the intersection of history and culture. Jaroslav Pelikan’s *Jesus Through the Centuries*, is another modern classic that examines the different things said about Jesus throughout two millennia of history. Understanding what people are saying about Jesus helps us understand the context of the world in which we live today.

However, the second question Jesus asks is very personal: “*But who do you say that I am?*” This question was aimed at Jesus’ disciples, and it is also aimed at each of us. Peter’s answer to the question is not a report about someone else, it is a confession of faith: “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*” Peter’s confession came from the gift grace. God enabled Peter to say, “*You are the Messiah.*” Jesus explains to Peter, “*For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my*

Father in heaven.” In other words, Peter’s confession didn’t depend upon human will power, “*flesh and blood*” – his confession revealed the gift and presence of God.

As the gift of God, Peter’s confession also contains the power of God. This is why Jesus said to Peter, “*You are Peter*” (which means “rock”), “*and upon this rock I will build my church.*” Peter is “a chip off the old block” of Abraham and Sarah; Peter is a chip off the old block of faith in the God of Israel. This rock of faith is the living power of God indwelling in Peter, and this power of God dwells in all of us who confess Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ. So do not take your confession for granted - your confession is the power of God alive in you. Of course, this means that Peter wasn’t born with this power. Peter was encountered by Jesus and grew in faith.

Today is Confirmation Sunday. Like Peter, none of us are born “fully formed” in faith. Without a lot of help, none of us grow in “faith, hope, and love.” Today Michael, Maddie, and Jake have each confessed their faith in the words of the Apostles’ Creed, and also with their very personal Statements of Faith. In their confession of faith, we see the power of God alive in them.

Confirmation, however, is not a graduation. Sometimes, in my experience as a pastor, parents tend to look at it like a graduation, especially because of the time involved. Instead however, confirmation is a point of departure. These three young people have confessed Christ today at this moment in their human journey and they will continue to confess Christ throughout their lives. Jesus will continue to come to each of them asking, “*But who do you say that I am?*” “Who do you say that I am?” - as an 8th Grader, as a high school student, as a college student, as a young adult, and beyond? Throughout their human journey, Jesus’ question will take on added depth and dimension. Jesus’ question “*But who do you say that I am?*” is not a one-time graduation question, but a question that frames our entire journey as human beings.

Paul speaks of this in today’s second reading, “*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.*” All of us struggle daily with our faith in the world. The world would like for us to be conformed to the world and not to God. To be conformed to the world means to fit in, blend in, to behave like everyone else. To be conformed to the world means that we place the interests of the world first before our confession of Christ. We are tempted to qualify our confession of Christ with the standards of the world.

The world tells us to look out for “#1”, to keep out those who are different and those who refuse to be conformed to the world. The world has a “sliding scale of humanity,” which means the world

is also a racist place that says that some people are better than others. The world will want you to be conformed to and follow its leaders rather than follow Christ. Racism, nationalism, classism, sexism, are just some of the things the world wants us to conform to.

However, Paul says, “*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.*” God transforms each of us with grace over the journey a lifetime. God renews our minds so that we can finally see and understand the world and age in which we live, and confess who Christ is for us today. Each day God renews us so that we can discern what is “*good and acceptable and perfect*” before God.

Isaiah is encouraging us to be “a chip off the old block” of Abraham, Sarah, Paul, Peter, Martha, Mary, and of course, Jesus. “*Look to the rock from which you were hewn,*” means remembering whose hands are sculpting, shaping, and polishing us. It means opening ourselves to being renewed and transformed by Christ over the journey of a lifetime. This is the journey of faith that our confirmands Michael, Maddie, and Jake have embarked upon as young people. Do not be conformed to the ways of the world, but seek what is “good and acceptable, and perfect” to God. Strive for the higher things of God.

The Psalm for today reads, “*For great is the glory of the Lord. For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away.*” “*The Lord is high*” means God is powerful and strong, has authority, and yet God has regard for the lowly. The Lord is strong and helps the weak. This is the God who is transforming each of us in our weakness and our sinfulness.

“*But the haughty he perceives from far away.*” In the world, those seated in positions of authority do not always work for the lowly or the weak. In the world, many times those in positions of authority do not always work for the poor and hungry, incarcerated and homeless, the sick, the outcast, the foreigner, and those in need. God perceives the haughty from far away because they do not regard “the least of these,” the lowly.

Jesus told Peter that the church would be built upon his confession. Confessing Christ and the work of the church go hand in hand. Confessing Christ is the power of God that builds up the body, the church. Paul explains that we do this by presenting our bodies “*as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.*” The power of Christ renews and transforms us, and Christ gives us the keys to the kingdom of heaven to do the work of God here on earth. We cannot do God’s work without grace and faith. We cannot do God’s work if we are conformed to a world of hatred, division, and racism – not with the keys that Christ entrusts his church with.

With the keys to the kingdom of heaven we are to bind the powers of injustice, racism, hatred and war, so that they no longer have power on earth, and we are to loose the bonds of oppression, enslavement, discrimination, and poverty so that the lowly and mistreated are finally free here on earth as they will be in heaven. *“For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly.”* God looks at the haughty, the proud, and the arrogant from far away. They do not receive God’s blessing, power, and the keys of the kingdom.

Each week in the offertory prayer we name all we have “our selves, our time, and our possessions,” and we pray, “Use us, and what we have gathered, in feeding the world.” As followers of Jesus we present our bodies as a living sacrifice - our selves, our time, and our possessions. As we pray, so too, we confess our faith.

Over a lifetime of service to others, we pray: “Use us, O Lord, use the power of our hands and voices, use our time and our possessions for your work in this world. Use your body, the church to unbind and loose all that enslaves and limits the lowly, so that all people might know true freedom in you. O Lord, you ask us *“But who do you say that I am?”* O Lord, help us answer the question of a lifetime, and build your church upon living stones. Give shape and form to our lives, O Lord, transforming our minds and our bodies into living stones hewn from you, the Master and Creator. O Lord, at every point of departure along our journeys ask us, again and again, the one question with power to renew and transform us: *“Who do you say that I am?”* Amen.