

A Bold Confession
 Matthew 16:13-19
 August 27, 2023

“Now when Jesus came to the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’”

Dear Friends in Christ,

“Who do people say the Son of Man is?” That sounds like the kind of question you might get when someone is taking an opinion poll.

The problem with opinion polls is this — in our sinful human condition, our opinions are generally wrong, false, misleading dreams. So it ends up that one person’s opinion is just as good as another’s. And in the end, it doesn’t really seem to matter who’s right.

The question put by our Lord today still solicits a multitude of responses. Who is Jesus? Plenty of people in our post-Christian culture would admit to Jesus being a good man, one of the classics of world spirituality like Buddha or Ghandi, or the Dalai Lama. Others — maybe those who had a smattering of Sunday school as children — would consider Him to be a good example. Still others might answer that He was a teacher of principles for effective living — how to persevere, how to meet your goals, how to live a successful life.

They might even use Jesus as an example in their business seminars — how to change the world with just 12 employees and the right vision. Plenty of our Jewish or Muslim neighbors would fully admit that Jesus was a great prophet of God, one who deserves His place in the long line of God’s historic prophets. And you might have to add a new category if you were taking a multiple choice opinion survey about who Jesus is today: We might call it “e” — None of the above — or, more to the point — “does anyone really care?”

Even within the visible church of our day, within Christendom, the answers to the poll question: “Who is Jesus?” would be opinions of various shapes and sizes:

- * Jesus the social conscience, fighting for the rights of the poor, the advocate of the farmer, the union booster, or
- * Jesus the feminist advocate, spearheading the fight for a woman’s right to choose, battling the specter of male domination and oppression, or
- * Jesus the liberator of creation, who impels us to bring about a new world order where our environment is considered sacred again, or
- * Jesus the entertainer, who attracts all those spiritual seekers through the inventive antics of the preachers and people who come together to “celebrate” Him.

Opinions abound all the more today concerning who Jesus is, since we have had many more centuries to think about it — and more resources from which to form the wrong opinion about Him. All of this begs a question: **Was Jesus really taking an opinion poll?**

Jesus is the all-knowing Lord, who understands better than we, how misguided we are in our own minds; who, as the Psalmist declares, “remembers that we are dust,” and that our opinions are not worth much more than dust either. Jesus’ seeking of human opinion will always show us how wrong we are. We don’t get it! We miss the point! We, who are by fallen nature false, will never come up with the truth on our own. But — thanks be to God — He doesn’t wait for us to get it on our own. Jesus puts again the question that needs answering more than any other question in the world: “What about you? Who do you say I am?” And Simon Peter confesses with great boldness, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Take care to notice that this is NOT Simon Peter’s opinion about Jesus. This is his confession of faith. There is a big difference between the two.

Opinions are what we come up with out of our own little minds, and they are often wrong, since our minds are finite and in bondage to sin. But the confession of faith is something delivered to us, given to us to speak, revealed and handed down to us. That’s why Jesus replies to Peter, “Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by My Father in heaven.”

And so, with Luther, we confess: “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel...” Peter was called by the Gospel. He had seen the miracles that testify to Jesus being the Christ. He had witnessed Jesus’ authority over demons and over the wind and rain on Galilee. He had heard the teaching of this One who taught with the authority of God’s Messiah. And so Peter boldly proclaims what had been given to him to believe: “You are the Christ, the Spon of the living God.”

And, by virtue of his confession — which is actually God’s gift to him — Peter is given a new name with a new purpose and new meaning. Jesus says, “I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” What does this mean — that **Peter** is the rock on which the church is built? Well, Peter’s un-rock-like character is ironically portrayed only moments after this complimentary-sounding word from our Lord when Peter tries to prevent Jesus from His appointed mission in Jerusalem. And we know from the Gospels how inconsistent and impetuous this same Peter the confessor could be.

However, it was not Peter’s character that earned him this designation from Jesus. Nor was it Peter’s brilliant and insightful opinions. Peter is GIVEN a solid foundation — as the whole church of Jesus Christ is given the same foundation — only through and **because of the confession** that the heavenly Father grants to our minds and hearts and mouths. We are “rock-like” only through faith in Him who is the true Rock. As St. Peter would write later in his first epistle: “As you come to Him, the Living Stone — rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to Him — you also, like living stones, are built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” We are built upon the Rock through our confession of faith in Jesus, who is the Christ.

“Christ” means “Anointed One” — Messiah. This term carried a freight of weight for Peter and the other Apostles who grew up in expectation of God’s coming one, God’s Anointed. And some of that freight was untrue. Incorrect opinions had developed concerning who the Christ would be and what the Christ would do. That helps us understand why Peter — who with great boldness made the rock-solid confession — even Peter would misunderstand what Jesus was all about, and take offense at the thought of suffering and rejection and a cross for His Lord and Master. So also the church of Christ today may misunderstand who the Christ is whom we confess. Like Peter, we may think that our boldness about Him is due to His visible victory over all that ails us in this life. But the Christ of God has come to suffer. The Christ of God has come to give His life as the ransom for the world.

The Christ of God does not look appealing in the world's eyes. It's no wonder that we shape opinions about Him that would make following Him more glamorous. You know how it goes: "Just give your heart to Jesus and you will have good health, prosperity, popularity." "Just pray this or that prayer of faith and you will receive all the blessings the Lord wants for you." Yet again and again, the Father delivers to us, hands down to us, the truth of who Christ Jesus is and the truth of what Christ Jesus does. After Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection, Peter is blessed to share this rock-like confession of faith when he preaches before the Jerusalem crowd on the day of Pentecost — when he declared that Jesus is the One "whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead," that Jesus, as was prophesied, is the "Stone the builders rejected, which has become the capstone." Speaking of no one else but the Christ — the living Son of God who as son of Mary suffered for our guilt and sin, Peter proclaims with great boldness that "salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Since we, by the grace of God, have been made "living stones" in Christ, just as Peter was, we too have also been GIVEN by our heavenly Father the same great boldness with which to confess Him in our world. Today we pray that the same heavenly Father would pour out His Spirit and raise up among us church workers who will follow in Peter's footsteps.

After proclaiming the confession of Jesus as the Christ to be the rock on which His church will be built, Jesus indicates HOW this church will be built. "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." The Kingdom of heaven is entered only by those whose sins are forgiven, those who are clothed in the righteousness of Jesus the Christ. The calling of Peter, and of those who follow him into the holy office of the ministry, is to bind and loose sins, to declare the forgiveness of those who repent their sin and confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, but also to declare that those who do not repent and confess this faith are NOT forgiven.

Such a calling is offensive to a world holding the opinion that no one has the right to judge in such a way. How many times has it been said that it is pretty presumptuous for a guy dressed in funny clothes to stand at the front of a church and tell everyone there that he "forgives them all their sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit?" Such a calling is sometimes offensive even in Christ's church, when opinions arise that would strip Peter and the pastors in his shoes of the authority that Christ Himself grants here. In some parts of Christendom, to proclaim with Peter that there is no other name save Jesus by which we are saved is called narrow-minded and intolerant. In other parts of the world this truth is proclaimed at the risk of persecution and even death.

For this reason, it is only with great boldness that any will take up this calling to become a pastor in Christ's church. And for this reason we call upon the heavenly Father, who alone can grant such boldness to the servants whom He has called and chosen. By the miraculous working of the Holy Spirit, the Good News that Jesus is the Christ will break through erroneous opinions — our own and those around us — in order that the Name that brings salvation — the name of Jesus, the Son of the Living God — may be given to people so that they may be saved. And by the Spirit's power we will confess Jesus to be the Christ with great boldness — boldness because we are not "spouting" our own opinions, but bearing witness to the Christ and telling of Him who has been revealed to us by the Father in heaven. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.