

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?
Confirmation Sunday –June 25, 2017 –Matthew 16: 13-20
The Church of the Covenant

Who is Jesus to you? Who do you say that HE is to you? In a way that's always the question in every Confirmation Class and for every believer in every time and place. I love Confirmation Classes and working with kids. I have always loved the opportunity to get to know our kids, to work with them in matters of faith, to pray for them, to believe in their future, and to get to see in a first-hand way what the Lord is doing in their lives. We have a small class this year. Large isn't always good and small isn't always bad. Sometimes you can have large classes where no one seems to be impacted spiritually and this year each of the young men in the class, I believe, has had profound life-shaping experiences. I've had the luxury of spending lots of time with them, sitting and discussing their statements of faith twice, praying with them; I have a picture of them on my prayer board at home and pray for them each day, and that will continue for a long, long time. As I said to them on Thursday, "You don't know this, but you're stuck with me. I'm praying for you, every day, to be raised up as strong men of God."

We began several weeks ago with a class on writing their statements of faith, and we began with scripture, and with the story I just read to you of the interaction between Jesus and Peter from Matthew 16. You remember the story. Jesus comes up to the disciples and asked: "*Who do men say that the Son of man is?*" (Matthew 16: 13) The disciples huddled around a little bit, look down into the dust, observe their feet, you know, kind of like what any Confirmation Class would do on its first day. And they say, Well, you know, Jesus, some say you're Elijah or Jeremiah or John the Baptist. You're a really good person, Jesus. You're a great teacher and Rabbi. You're a likely memorable historical figure. You might even be a prophet, even one of the greatest ones like Elijah. They tell Jesus what they have heard others say about Jesus. If there had been a Sunday School in that day they would have regurgitated what they had heard there, or what their parents had told them, or what their best friend had said about Jesus at school that day. They gave Jesus some nice, safe, Sunday School answers when asked who Jesus is. But, see, that isn't the real question Jesus was asking. Not at all. So Jesus poses the question again, but this time makes it personal. Jesus goes, No, no, no: "*But who do YOU say that I am?*" (Matthew 16: 15) I don't care what the world says about me. And by the way, the world is going to try to diminish me; the world is going to try to turn me into just a good person, an example, a teacher, someone like Buddha or Confucius or Mohammed. No, I'm not like them at all. Now at this point I have to ask us all to try to consider that we have never heard all the formulations of who Jesus is. And to consider that Jesus Himself has never up to this point in time declared who He is. It is called the Messianic Secret in the Bible. Jesus heals someone and then tells them to keep it quiet, don't tell anyone, but of course they run home and tell everyone what Jesus just did for them. He's not trying to give them a rote Sunday School answer. He's trying to have them figure out who He really is. He's going to wait until the Holy Spirit comes. He's going to wait until God speaks into their heart and tells them who He is. It's hard for us today, having heard about Jesus for our whole lives, to consider that there was a time when even Jesus wasn't telling people who He is; He was letting them figure it out on their own. They saw Him heal and do miracles; they heard Him preach like no one else ever preached; they felt drawn closer and closer to God by Jesus. Who is this guy? Is this the Messiah? Is this just an earthly Messiah? Or is this more than that? Is Jesus totally unique? Completely different? Who is Jesus????

So Peter blurts out: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*" (Matthew 16: 16) Peter had nailed it; it is exactly who Jesus is; classic orthodox formulation about who Jesus is. But no person told Peter this, not even Jesus. GOD told Peter who Jesus is; the Holy Spirit came and spoke who Jesus is into Peter's heart. And that's where Peter's "Statement of Faith" came from. Not from a book. Not from a class. Not from someone else. Peter's Confession of Faith in Jesus came from God HIMSELF. A real one always comes from God Himself speaking into someone's heart and telling us who Jesus really is...

So often we ask kids to write statements of faith and they write some meandering tirade that often contains their doubts or how boring church is. And then we say, "O, isn't that cute." No it isn't. From that it's clear they have no idea who Jesus is. Jesus is exactly who He is and our opinion of Him doesn't validate Him. His own person, who He is and what He does, makes Him valid for our lives. It isn't like FACEBOOK where something that has 472 "likes" has greater validity than something with two "likes". Jesus is reality as HE is; Jesus is self-validating; Jesus stands quite apart from whether we like Him or we don't like Him. We try to put into our words who Jesus really is and who Jesus really is in relation to us.

I always remember the one Confirmation Class many years ago where one young man showed up and his body language screamed out that he really didn't want to be there. When it got time to introduce himself he said: "I am a confirmed atheist. I am only here because my parents demand I be here. And nothing you say or do will convince me otherwise." So, what are you saying about Jesus? He was a pip; dripping with sarcasm and negativity. Debbie downer, in blue jeans and a ripped T-shirt. I fervently prayed for that young man. I wanted him to come to know Jesus. I didn't want him to reject the Lord and go to hell. Sometimes we view confirmation as a rite of passage. Its not. It's a moment to know who Jesus Christ is, to receive Him as Lord and Savior, to believe in His name, to follow Him with our lives, to be active, committed disciples. So when the kids are asked, they just say what they've heard their parents say. No. To reject Him is to reject life. To reject Him is to enter onto a pathway that leads to enmity with God. To say that Jesus means nothing to you, ultimately means that when you die, Jesus will say, even to those who then might cry out "Lord, Lord" He will say, "I never knew you." You don't know me; I don't know you. So there is a lot riding on this. Heaven and hell in the balance. There always is. So one day this ornery kid blurted out in class: "So why do you, Stu, believe in Jesus?" And even I knew that this was the answer to my prayer for this young man. And I knew that no Sunday School answers would suffice, no recitation of Bible verses or creeds would move this young man. So I said a quick prayer and then I let God speak...

I said, Well, I was raised in a good home like you are. My parents believed and tried to raise me right. I was baptized and I went to Confirmation Class and joined the church, I was active in Campus Life in High School, and when I went to college I prayed and received Jesus Christ into my heart. But I have to say that when Jesus particularly became real to me was when I was in law school. I had wanted to be a lawyer all my life from fourth grade onward. I wanted to go to the Dickinson School of Law because one of the men I looked up to the most graduated from there. I got good grades and I worked hard to get to law school. And when I arrived I discovered I really didn't like the law; the law wasn't right for me and I wasn't right for it. Have you ever had a failed dream? And then not know what to do next? And despaired? And was angry? Your whole life felt a failure? And one night I cried out to God and I shook my fist at heaven and I prayed: "Lord, I have made a complete mess of my life. You take charge of my life." Never pray that prayer unless you're really, really serious. Because God will take you at your word. And I was then reading the Bible as an adult for the very first time and I came upon the story of the Rich Young Ruler. And Jesus tells that young man that he has to give up everything he has in order to "Come, follow me." And I was putting myself in the story; I was the rich young ruler. And I expected a happy ending; I thought everything had a happy ending. But this story didn't. Because the young man turned and walked away from Jesus. The young man wasn't willing to give up his agenda for his own life. The young man walked away and Jesus was sad. And as I was reading I said to myself: My life has all been about my agenda for my-self. That is the thing I need to give up to follow Jesus. I don't want to turn and walk away from Him. Out of that encounter came my call. That's why I believe in Jesus. Of course, the young man in that confirmation class was rich, his father was a doctor. The young man knew exactly what God was saying to him and his attitude changed, and he accepted Jesus as Lord, and he joined the church. His parents were astounded, astonished and dumbfounded, wanted to thank me. I just would say, the Lord and the Holy Spirit spoke into your son's heart, not me...

One of the great privileges of my life has been working with these three wonderful young men this week in Confirmation Class. They followed the sign of the fish in order to find Jesus on Thursday. Jesus said: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." (Matthew 16: 24) You can still see them posted around the church today. Because every Confirmation Class also asks US the questions, asks the rest of us the question posed by Jesus to Peter. Jesus has come to each and every one of us today. Jesus is looking each and every one of us straight in the eye and asking us the question that young man asked me many years ago, "So why do you believe in Jesus?" No pat answers please. No Sunday School answers please. No credal responses. Not what your parents told you or what your friends tell you or what you read in some book. Jesus comes to you today, personally and in power, He's looking you right in the eye; He is here and He is asking you: "No, who do YOU say that I am?"

Jesus is waiting for your answer...Amen and Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, Pennsylvania
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*