

Talking Behind Your Back?

[based on Matthew 16:13-20]

In our scripture reading this morning, Jesus has led His disciples to Caesarea Philippi, an area named for one of Herod's sons, located 20 miles north of the sea of Galilee. The scene takes place just before Jesus will make His final journey to Jerusalem to be tried and executed.

These men had been together for almost three years and were followed by large crowds wherever they went. And because of this, Jesus wanted some private time with His disciples, to discuss some very important issues, and prepare them for what was to come.

If we were to just gloss over exactly *where* Jesus had taken the twelve, I think we would miss some interesting and important facts about this story. In real estate and business in general, people often say "location is everything," location, location, location.

I think Jesus wants this to be a teaching moment, one which His disciples will never forget. They have traveled twenty-five miles from Galilee to the base of Mount Hermon for this lesson.

At the time, this place would have been considered the "red light district" of the world - a place of terrible moral decay, debauchery, and darkness. As Jesus and His disciples spoke, they would have been looking out at the largest rock formation in Israel, and it was filled with pagan statues, and at least fourteen pagan temples sat in the background.

In Old Testament times, this area was the center of Baal worship. Eventually, the worship of Baal was replaced by the worship of Greek fertility gods. When the Romans conquered this territory, Herod the Great built yet another temple, this one in honour of Caesar Augustus, but the people also continued to worship the Greek gods.

One of the most interesting things is that Caesarea Philippi was also home to a cave known to the locals as the 'gate to the underworld'. These pagan worshipers believed that their city was literally at the "Gates of Hades." Hades is the name for the home of the dead.

Now, imagine Jesus standing, looking at this cliff with the pagan statues, at this place with pagan temples and shrines, with a temple praising the power of the Roman Empire and asking His disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" and then came the 6-million-dollar question, "But what about you? Who do you say that I am?" What a dramatic moment!

This question Jesus asks, is not simply about His identity, like getting an "A" on a Messianic quiz, it's also a question about allegiance. In what, or in whom, will the followers of Jesus place their trust? Will it be in the privileges coming from access to opportunity and wealth? Will it be in the worship of the prevailing culture's latest idols? Will it be in allegiance to the dominant power of earthly rulers? Or will they trust instead, in the One whose life, death, and Resurrection, will reveal the mercy, justice, love, and salvation, found in the Living God?

What would your answer be? Or better yet, in whom or what, *do* you place your trust? It's the question of the ages. It transcends time and circumstance.

It's Simon Peter who answered Jesus' question, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Now Peter has no idea what that entails, but who can blame him? It won't be until Jesus' death and Resurrection, and then the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, that the Truth comes to him. And even then, it takes a lifetime of trial and error, of learning and following Christ, to get a better and clearer idea of it all.

And it's the same for you and me. Think about it...did you know what would lay ahead for you when you accepted Christ as your Saviour, and decided to trust in Him? Did you suddenly understand it all, when you experienced a New Birth? The Christian journey is one of learning from Jesus as we follow Him, studying the Scriptures, and interpreting them through the lens of tradition, experience, and reason.

Remember that book that came out a decade or so ago? Its title was "Everything I Know, I Learned in Kindergarten." Sadly, there are many of us who could say, "Everything I know about Christianity, the Bible, and Jesus, I learned when I was a kid in Sunday school." But for a lot of folks, this is where it stops, creating immature Christians.

In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul tells the Christians at Corinth that he must give them spiritual milk instead of solid food, because they are still "babies in Christ." They have not moved on past the initial stage, even after a considerable amount of time. I think that many problems in churches come about because of this failure to grow in Christ.

So, Simon Peter gets Jesus' question right. He nailed His true identity, without a life line, a phone call to a friend, or polling an audience. Christ is, indeed, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God...FINAL ANSWER!

Then Jesus says to him, "You are blessed, Simon, son of Jonah. No one taught you that. My Father in heaven showed you who I am. So, I tell you, you are **Peter**, [which is Greek for "rock"] and I will build my church on this rock. Remember where they were? As Jesus is saying this, they were looking at that huge rock formation - the largest in Israel. And I can just imagine Him pointing at it, as He spoke those words.

Now, indeed, the “rock,” upon which Jesus builds His Church, is the profession of faith that Peter has just made...but think again about location, location, location. Metaphorically, Jesus’ Church will be built on the rock in Caesarea Philippi, a rock literally filled with idols for pagan gods, and where the kinds of wild pagan rituals which took place, would make Mardi Gras look like child’s play.

And in saying this, what is Jesus telling us? Jesus is saying that His Church will be built in the world, right in the middle of our messes. His Church will be built in human hearts. His Church will be built around the corner from crack houses and skid row. It will be built in a world where allegiances are made to money, sports, economic trade, greed, nations, indulgences of every kind, technology, and the worship of more idols than we can possibly count.

But Jesus’ Church isn’t going to run and hide from this. Instead, it will be a city built on a hill. It will be a light shining in the darkness for all the world to see. It will be the salt of the earth, a place where people find forgiveness, salvation, mercy, and love.

It will be a place where the hungry are fed, the naked are clothed, the thirsty are given a drink, the prisoners are visited, and the strangers are welcomed in. It will be the Kingdom of God on earth.

And it will be made up of people who profess Christ as Lord and Saviour, who will take up their cross, follow Him, and spread His good news throughout the world.

And, when pointing at that cave in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus declared “the power of death will not be able to defeat my church.” For through His death and Resurrection, Jesus will overcome death itself. He will set the prisoners of Hades free! They will be, as the Bible says, “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

For all who believe, as Paul proclaims, in 1 Corinthians 15, the saying will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The “the gates of Hades” will not overcome or defeat Christ’s Church.

Consider this... Gates are not used for offense; they are used for **defense**. They keep others out, and keep those inside, in. But Jesus’ resurrection goes on the offense against those gates. It builds a Church which storms the gates of Hades and sets the prisoners free!!! And the **Church**, through the power of Christ, and the Holy Spirit, also storms the gates of Hades.

When we are led by the Spirit, and proclaim the Good News of salvation to a spiritually dead world, that is how we become involved as members of Christ’s Holy Church.

We are called to follow Jesus and to make more disciples, for the transformation of the world. What could be more exciting? What could be more important?

And so, Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" hangs in the air, as they stand at the place which is a monument to paganism and the power of the Empire. And it is a question for each of us today. In what or in whom will we place our trust? Will it be in wealth or political leaders? Or instead, will we trust in the One whose life, death, and Resurrection built a church that proclaims the mercy, justice, love and salvation, found in the Living God who created heaven and earth? Will we trust in the only One who has the power to save?

Jesus said, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." And He wasn't just saying that to Peter. The church is not founded on Peter, just as it is not founded on John the Baptist or Elijah, Luther or John Wesley. No, the rock is not Peter, but rather, Peter's testimony.

Jesus is saying this to us. "Who do you say that I am?" The choice is ours to make. He will give us the keys to the kingdom of heaven, as a free gift. We will have the ability to enter and open the door for others. Who **we** say that Jesus is, is demonstrated by our life, our allegiance, and our testimony, given through both words and deeds.

In the first Christian sermon ever given on the Day of Pentecost, Peter proclaimed: "Be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah. Repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who believe!"

Friends, the gift of hind-sight gives us, like Peter, the correct answer to Jesus' question.

Now the bigger question is "Who do people say **you** are, when they talk about you behind **your** back?"

AMEN