

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost - Year A

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Isaiah 51:1-6

Pslam 138

Romans 12:1-8

Matthew 16:13-20

08/27/2023

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Matthew:

13Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 18And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." 20Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Luke

Good morning! When I worked in youth ministry in college I would always give an invitation to take the high school students to worship with my at my home congregation. The only person that consistently took me up on the offer was Luke. So, almost every Sunday I would wake up early, get ready, and instead of driving the 10 minutes to First English Lutheran Church I would drive the 15-20 minutes in the opposite direction to Luke's house in "the country" to pick him up. We would go to worship, and after I would drive him home, and then go back to my own house. Luke and I have since lost touch, and I'm not sure how active he is in a worshipping community, but for around 3 years he was an active part of my life, and the life of First English Lutheran Church in Wheeling, WV. That community doesn't exist in the same form now. The building was sold after attendance shrank to around 5-10 people. It can be easy to think of all of that as a failure, but I don't look at it that way. *"18And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

Our Gospel lesson today sees the disciples doing something that isn't so different from what the church does now, discussing who exactly this Jesus guy might be. They are clearly unsure. Some argue that he is John the Baptist, which is weird since they both lived at the same time. They also suggest some of the greatest prophets, or maybe another prophet that had come again. What's interesting is that all of these answers are rooted in the past. One commentator points out that *"people identify the Son of Man with dead prophets sent by God who did miraculously deeds, who stood*

toe-to-toe with kings and delivered to them words of doom, opposition, and hope from Yahweh. So in the eyes of the people John the Baptist was the last powerful man of God but others had to reach all the way back to Jeremiah. Still they are all dead men! Did the people believe that God could not out do God's self? Did they believe like Jesus that no greater human being born had been born from a woman than John (Matthew 11:11)? What kind of human being is Jesus in light of the many powerful deeds he has performed and the many people who follow him? The people believe that Jesus is an incarnation or perhaps a specter or ghost of powerful male prophets who no longer walk the earth. It is Elijah and Moses that appear with Jesus on the mountain of transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-13). Peter, James and John were there on the mountain of transfiguration with Jesus, so they knew Jesus was not Elijah (or Moses). Those who witnessed John the Baptist baptize Jesus knew that Jesus was not John the Baptist (3:13-17).¹

But it's everyone's favorite outspoken disciple who boldly proclaims that *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."* This isn't something that they have seen before, this is something radically new. Peter and the disciples had witnessed incredible things as they traveled with Jesus, and at this point in the Gospel of Matthew we see a shift as Jesus starts to prepare the disciples for what is to come in Jerusalem.² And in this first lesson Peter hits it right out of the park. God is doing something new. Dr. Mitzi J. Smith of Columbia Theological Seminary writes beautifully that *"A living God is a dynamic God and not a static God whose clearest communication*

¹<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-21/commentary-on-matthew-1613-20-4=>

² Hare, Douglas R. *Matthew*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. p. 188.

happened in the past.”³ Man. That’s good. Listen/read that again. The Israelites had been under occupation and oppression from one group after another. For 500 years it had been bad news. When they looked at the “best” time, they thought back to their past. Does that sound familiar? Jesus had come to challenge that sort of thinking.

Pastors and scholars often connect this text with the institution of clergy and the larger church body, but Dr. Smith has a different and interesting approach. She argues that it’s not just Peter that the church will be built on, but the truth that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of a LIVING God. She writes: “Jesus continues the dialogue with Peter: *“I say to you Peter (Petros) that on this rock (petra) I shall build my ekklesia (assembly; usually translated church) and the gates of Hades shall not overpower her” (Matthew 16:18, author’s translation). The word petra translated as rock is grammatically feminine and it agrees with the Greek word ekklesia, which is also grammatically feminine. Thus, the noun petra does not refer to Peter. Perhaps Jesus is speaking of the physical place or space in which his identity was correctly named. Or perhaps it is the revelation itself that is the theological foundation on which Jesus will erect God’s ekklesia. It will be an assembly founded on Jesus’ identity as the Messiah of the living God. A living God is a relevant God, a contextual God.*”⁴

Which brings me back to my friend Luke. It can be easy to say that his tenuous worship attendance now is a sign that I failed. But that fails to see God’s work as something that is a living, breathing activity. It also fails to take in account the real, honest-to-goodness life that was a part of our

³<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-21/commentary-on-matthew-1613-20-4>

⁴ Ibid.

friendship at the time. Or the friendships and life that took place in the congregation for years and years. Life has certainly changed, but so has God's work. If we want to be a community that confesses Jesus as the living God, we need to boldly see the good that was done and the new ways that God is calling the church NOW! Who knows, we might find ourselves changed along the way too. Amen.