

A Foundation of Faith

Matthew 16:13-20
August 27, 2023

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In a 1936 lecture,¹ German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer proposed an alternative way to read scripture. Instead of questioning the Bible from our perspective, he challenges us to let the Bible question us, the choices we make, the lives we lead.

“This advice became extraordinarily powerful in Bonhoeffer’s own life,” says L. Gregory Jones, writing in Christian Century magazine.²

“He discovered that Scripture was questioning him and the people of Nazi Germany in their treatment of Jews, and this discovery led him to new patterns of thought and action.”

These new thoughts and actions led to Bonhoeffer’s imprisonment and execution, by the Nazis for his opposition to Adolf Hitler.

In our New Testament scripture for today from the Bible, Jesus questions us, saying, “... Who do you say that I am?” How we answer that question will determine our thoughts and actions, the choices we make, the lives our lead.

And yet, how we answer the question, what that answer means to us is determined by the society we live in, just as it was for Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany and the disciples in Caesarea Philippi, when they answered Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?”

When Jesus asked his disciples this question, Matthew tells us they had just entered Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi was built by the Roman governor Herod Philip, who named the city after himself and the emperor, Tiberius Caesar. So, it’s a major hub of Roman power.

And not only that, but it was home to the religious cult dedicated to Pan, the half-goat, half-man god known for wild times, frenzied parties and sexual promiscuity. This is where Jesus begins questioning his disciples, and in that questioning the culture, the times they lived in.

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” he asks his disciples. “Some say John the Baptist,” they reply, “but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

Jesus wants to know what the people are saying about him, and in that, what they are revealing about themselves. It’s the Bible asking questions of them, and their culture.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The Presentation of New Testament Texts,” 1936.

² L. Gregory Jones, Christian Century, June 1, 2004.

After Jesus asks the disciples – “... Who do you say that I am?” – Simon Peter says, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” In the midst of all the power and wealth and pleasure of his society and culture, that’s the answer Simon Peter gives. And that’s the type of answer Jesus wants from us. Jesus wants us to answer his question – “Who do you say that I am?” – in the context of our culture, and our society.

Our culture is a blend of different beliefs and practices, all of it coming at us from vastly different places. Our society is governed by people with completely different perspectives about the role of government, how to promote the safety and prosperity of our families, our communities, our nation, and our world. In that context of diversity, power struggles, and divisiveness, who do we say that Jesus is? How do you answer Jesus? Something to think about?

When Peter said that Jesus is the Messiah, he was saying that Jesus is the “anointed one,” which is what Messiah means. It means that Jesus is the new king, and the Son of the living God, says Peter. Peter is saying that Jesus’ kingdom is from God, not of this earthly realm. It’s above it and over it. Jesus is the King of kings, ruler of all that is, both in heaven and on earth. That’s what Simon Peter says.

Hearing this, Jesus says, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...,” on Peter’s faith statement.

Peter’s faith in who Jesus is, his conviction about what Jesus means to him and all the world – that is the foundation upon which Jesus builds his church, our church, any church that holds its faith in Jesus as the cornerstone of their ministry, their future as a church.

What is the cornerstone of our ministry? What is the foundation of our future as a church?

Is it how much money we have? The number of people on our membership roles? Is the foundation of this church all the ministry programs we have – things like our missions giving and community outreach, our Sunday school classes and small groups, fellowship events and all-church lunches, Sunday worship and mid-week LOGOS?

Are those really the foundation of this church, or is it something more fundamental? Maybe those are the building blocks resting on the foundation. If that’s true, then what is the foundation of this church, and how do we maintain it and build upon it?

Just like it is Peter’s faith statement that Jesus builds upon, he likewise builds on our faith statements, when we answer the question – “Who do you say that Jesus is?” – and answer in the context of our culture and society.

If we maintain our faith in Jesus and his church as the foundation upon which to build our church, then we – like the disciples – are assured that the “gates of Hades,” as Jesus says, “will not prevail against it.” In other words, it is our faith that keeps us from being pulled down, from reaching a dead end.

So you see, the true purpose and blessing of our ministry programs is for building and maintaining our faith, your faith. It is your faith upon which the church is built. Now here’s the take-home, folks. Since it is our faith lives on which this church’s future depends, that is why it is so important to bring ourselves – and I mean our whole selves – to church, so that we continue to grow our faith and maintain who we are as followers of Jesus.

Saying that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, is just words if we don’t build upon it, if we don’t lay our faith on the line and build upon it, through our generosity in a world of self-interest, through our spirit of forgiveness in a world of retaliation, our acts of compassion in a world of harsh judgment, our words of encouragement in a world of nasty gossip, our acts of worship and praise in a world of criticism and complaint, and our presence at and commitment to this church’s ministry programs in a world of overwhelming obligations and enticing distractions.

You and your faith are the foundation of this church. This church is here to build you up, to build up your faith, which is the building blocks Jesus uses to build up this church. So come on out the next chance you get, come on out – not as an obligation – but rather for the building up of your faith, so that Jesus can build up our church.

Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Jesus, what was it like to walk with you when you were here on earth? Oh, how well we would have known you if we had seen you and heard your voice?

We are so grateful for your Living Word, which tells us the stories of your life, death and resurrection.

Through your Word, we are called and equipped to love the least of these. Through the stories of your life, we are called and equipped to the selfless giving that was who you are. We are thankful for our salvation and the opportunity to give of ourselves for your sake. We are thankful for your presence in our lives this day, and ask your blessing upon those who need you most.

We pray your peace and comfort for grieving a loss. We pray your healing touch and Spirit of wellness upon dealing with medical issues. We pray all this in the name of the one who showed us the way, who reveals to us what a life of love and faithfulness looks like, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.