

**THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
**August 23, 2020; 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A**

SCRIPTURE READING

Matthew 16:13-20

<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Chosen One is?" <sup>14</sup> And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup> He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For no mere mortal has revealed this to you, but my Abba God in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you, Peter, your name is now 'Rock,' and on bedrock like this I will build my church, and the gates of Death will not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> I 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." <sup>20</sup> Then Jesus sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

SERMON

"Naming God"

Rev. Martin McGeachy

Have you ever been having a challenging conversation with your kid, and have that maddening moment when they say something to you that you tell them all the time, like "Dad, you need to take a deep breath and count to ten." Or, "Mother, you don't need to be so anxious. You're living in your fear." Ooooooh, that's annoying. Because they're right! Arrgh! Children will listen. Better get your words right. But also, and this is the infuriating part, better believe them, and use them. I touched on this last week, the easy ability to say the right church words, faith words, but the not so easy task of owning them and living into what they say.

Words matter. Not just in what they say to others, but what our words say to us as we say them. Right? Jesus says to the disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" But his lesson isn't for those people he's asking about, it's for the disciples. "But who do YOU say that I am?"

Imagine you're the one having this conversation with Jesus—because metaphorically, today you are. Even 2000 years later, the answer could be similar. Who do people say you are? "Well, Jesus, most say that you are a gifted prophet—a guide, a teacher, a preacher, a leader, a healer." All of that is true, of course, but if that's all, then in essence people say, and they do, "Jesus, you're a good guy and you've got some gifts. I can learn some stuff from you, and add it to my bag of beliefs—but I'm still waiting for true deliverance."

Indeed, many, many faithful members of religions feel this way, including our own. Christians learn to go to church and say good Jesus-words. "Jesus is my Lord and Savior." "In Jesus' name I pray." But some seem to think, "Well, that's it for Sunday. Honoring the Sabbath: Check! Now let me get back to my life, my struggle to

remain in comfort, quiet and abundance. Honey, close the window. I can hear the sounds of unhappiness outside in the world. Turn up the TV. It's time for my show."

This is the Jesus of self-help books. I've read quite a few, and they've been helpful, but they're like diets. Just about any diet works—for six weeks—but try keeping it up for a lifetime. For me, though, my faith is more than a temporary fix, and it's certainly not self-help, because like with those books and diets, my will at some point falters but God continues to welcome me back. Over and over and over, we are the prodigal children. Over and over and over, the question comes, as it does today, right now, "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter got a gold star for his answer. Right away he piped up, "You're the Savior—you are Deliverance from death, you are the very essence of what God is. And Jesus said, "Yes, this is my church. Not ritual, not words, not good works or good intentions, although those are all helpful components of my church. But they aren't the foundation on which to build; they are the tools one may use to build on the foundation of salvation and deliverance, which flows from the very essence of the Divine."

Peter's answer isn't a ritual statement for joining church. He is saying that Jesus, borne of the essence of God, is the Savior in whom we find Messiah, and this Saving is Love, for God is Love, in the form of Jesus, whose life was miraculously healing and informative, but whose death was his seminal moment of fulfillment, for into that ignominious act of self-giving we choose to worship sacrifice, forgiveness, trust in God and love for all others, even our enemies. No, I haven't forgotten the Resurrection, but there is no resurrection without crucifixion. We worship the God who died for us, that we may be raised.

Wow, that's a much longer answer than Peter offered; he was more succinct, but he hadn't become a preacher yet. He gets wordier after Pentecost.

Jesus isn't just a wise or nice prophet. And certainly not a wielder of the flaming sword of earthly justice who will smite our enemies. We cannot say that we worship the God of religion, the God of power, the God of dominance, the God of wealth, the God of comfort, or even the God of peace when it is merely the absence of conflict which acquiesces to suffering and injustice; we worship the God of sacrifice.

Listen to this list of characteristics of what it is to follow Jesus, Romans 12:9-21. The sub-heading in my Bible calls this section "*Marks of the True Christian:*"

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup> love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup> Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of God's family; extend hospitality to strangers.

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with those not as well off as you; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for the highest ideals in the eyes of all people. <sup>18</sup> If it

is possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with everyone. <sup>19</sup> Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave that to God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says Yahweh." <sup>20</sup> And God also says, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

All that we can unpack from the phrase, "You, Jesus, are the Messiah." This is the rock, the bedrock on which we are built. On which Jesus has built His church. Not on magic words of ritual. It's the rock on which I build my Confirmation Class every fall. I begin our year of faith formation by asking them THE question. Your parents say this about what it is to follow Jesus. Your pastor says this; your friends say that. But none of that matters. When you are Confirmed, you answer the question, "Who do I say that Jesus is?"

And answering Jesus' question, *who do you say that I am*, also answers the other question—*who do you say that you are?* I am a beloved child of grace and love; and so is my neighbor. *Who am I?* is also a question we need to ask every day.

We have unparalleled freedom in the United States; we're the home of the brave and the land of the free, we sing. We have freedom to speak as we will, worship as we will, to be a bedrock of love for our fellow citizens, or have hearts of stone and be dumb as rocks towards each other. So, also, from the dawn of humanity, as we see in the tale of Adam and Eve, we have freedom to choose God—or not. Free will. And if we do freely choose to believe in God, we also have been given an astounding freedom: to choose who we think God is. Nowhere in the Bible does God reveal God's name. Yahweh, El Shaddai, I Am, Elohim, Adonai, Abba; these are all placeholders. Why? Because you and I, tiny though we are, have been asked to name God for ourselves. "Who do you say I am?" Jesus says, this Jesus whom we name as God in Trinity. What will you name God? Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, Wonder, Lover, Giver, Healer? Or Wrath? Punisher, Divider, Puppetmaster, Disciplinarian? Hallowed be Thy name. Just like Peter, the answer you give will reveal who you are, too. Peter's answer built a church. Another answer might build a prison of chains or a tower of anger, a cell of terror. It's a humbling privilege, naming God. We have to be careful what our answer will build.

What we tell ourselves, what we tell others, what we tell God, all has power. That is why we're asked to confess the Lord. You've heard the expression "speaking it into existence." When a 13-year-old kid nervously gets up in front of the church and says, "I am a Christian," what does she mean? Something very different from when she says it at 83, but if she says it once a week for seventy years, I guarantee it will strengthen her. We live into our faith, and naming our faith is an important part of it.

Many people say affirmations and language don't matter. But imagine in reverse. If, every morning, Waldo gets up and says, "I believe the powers of darkness will control me all day to day," you better believe Waldo is right.

I watched an old movie on TV yesterday in which at the beginning of the film a blissfully happy couple was on their honeymoon, and one said, "Tell me, do you love me?" And the other said, "Don't you know?" To which the one naturally replied, "But I want you to say it." And this was the following dialogue, I kid you not: "No, I don't. What about you; do you love me?" "Of course not." "Well, I don't love you and you don't love me. Apparently we were made for each other." And they kiss. I think we in the audience were supposed to find that clever and cute. Spoiler, when the credits rolled, they did not end up happily ever after.

There's a reason why partners make vows when they get married. Not because there's an expectation that they will never falter as they love honor and cherish, but because the vows help to create the actual marriage that follows the wedding.

I mentioned Adam & Eve's famous choice, whether or not to disobey God, but that's not the first choice that a human got to make. It was naming. There's an interesting tidbit in the account of creation in Genesis 2; after God has created Adam, and the plants and animals, God feels like Adam should have a partner, and so sets Adam to naming all the beasts and birds (must have taken awhile), and the Bible says that he named them all, but didn't find a helper for his partner. So God made Eve. Isn't it interesting that it's in the naming of all creatures that Adam defines what would be positive partnership? I'm sure many of you would have gotten to "Cat," and stopped and said, that'll do right there, or maybe "Dog." But the point is that our Naming of the world around us defines our need. We have a part with God in our existential reality. We get to Name it.

There's a terrific website devoted primarily to listing words that are positive, and inviting people to use them. Isn't that nice?

Affirmations are very powerful. Your subconscious mind does not think in terms of past, present or future. If you affirm that you "want" something, then you get "the wanting" but you don't really get the thing that you are wanting. To get what you want, affirmations must be at present tense! When you say I AM HAPPINESS, then life will provide you the means to have happiness. Replace I WANT affirmations with I AM affirmations.... Human beings have two main powers on Earth: Awareness and Choice. Become aware of who you actually are so that you can make a good choice. ...this anonymous quote: "I AM are two of the most powerful words, for what you put after them shapes your reality."

([The Power of I AM Affirmations - Positive Words Research - https://positivewordsresearch.com/i-am/](https://positivewordsresearch.com/i-am/))

The Creator of the Universe says simply, "I am." Creator God doesn't even have to specify an affirmation. "They" just ARE. –Am. Or, to paraphrase Descartes, *I create love, therefore I Am.*

Instead, we're far more likely to echo this from cartoonist Harry Bliss:



Words matter. Who will you say you are today? Who will you say Jesus is today? In our Presbyterian tradition we say that Jesus and Yahweh and the Holy Spirit are Three-In-One. They, It, is God. God, who simply self-names as "I am."

I've heard some people say that for them, "God," G.O.D. stands for "Good Orderly Direction." Or "Great Original Deity." I looked it up online and I also found "Grand Old Decision," and "Guaranteed Overnight Delivery." In the world of computer gaming, they say "Gamemaster On Duty;" I kind of like that one. Or "Greatest Order of Diversity." But the point is choosing the the name. Who do you say? I thought about it, and came up with "Gracious Omniscient Delight." I also thought of "Groovy One Desire," but it seemed a little stuck in the '70's.

But that's me. Who do you say that God is?

Amen.