

Matthew 16:13-20
"Who is Jesus?"
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

August 23, 2020
First Lutheran Church, Glencoe, Minn.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Intro]

[Jesus asked His disciples:] ***"But who do you say that I am?"*** (Matthew 16:15)

Who is Jesus? This question has been asked ever since He first walked in the flesh on this earth. *Who is Jesus?*

In the last century, C.S. Lewis famously answered this question this way: Jesus was either God, a lunatic, or an evil man.

So, *who is Jesus?* There are as many questions today as there were back in the First Century. Even people who profess to follow Jesus as their Lord still ask questions.

Back in the First Century, when people were asked: *"What do you think of Jesus?"* There were various answers. The religious leaders and crowds alike, each had their own ways, on answering this question. And, most often, they didn't know how to answer the question: *Who is Jesus?*

Many of these people saw Jesus perform miraculous things, but they still did not understand.

"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Matthew 16:13) ***"Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets"*** (Matthew 16:14). All questions. No definitive answer.

[False Christs]

Today, Jesus can be whoever you want Him to be. Well, according to some. And, this some is a lot of people.¹

¹ Matthew Richard. *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up: 12 False Christs* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017).

Jesus could be your **personal mascot**, who cheers your every decision. With His pom-poms, this Jesus stands on the sidelines of life encouraging people in their pursuit of happiness. Instead of confronting you with your sinful nature with God's Ten Commandments unto repentance, He always cheers and always supports your every decision.

Jesus could be **just one option among many ways to salvation**. This Jesus is non-exclusive and like all other religious leaders. He preaches the modern view of tolerance and most definitely will never speak the truth for the sake of maintaining peace at all costs. He never preaches right or wrong, but only a grey area.

Jesus could be your **good teacher**, who is nothing more than a wise religious person.

Jesus could be your **therapist**. He is just a means to a possible solution.

Jesus could be your **giver of bling**. He dispenses health, wealth, and success to those whose faith reaches a certain level. So, if I only do this or that, I will become healthy or wealthy, but this Jesus never discusses suffering. It is all about your life now!

Jesus could be your **national patriot**. He leads the nation in the pursuit of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness – the American Dream. So, whatever the nation approves or makes law, of course, Jesus naturally approves.

Jesus could be your **social justice warrior**. Here, Jesus turns into a warrior who is all about liberating the oppressed from unjust economic, political, spiritual, and social conditions. He fights for the oppressed and fights against the oppressors.

Jesus could be your **moral example**, who emphasizes moralistic living at the expense of forgetting the cross. Here, we believe we can be as good as Jesus. If Jesus could be righteous, why can't I? But we fail to understand the implications of original sin.

Jesus could be your **mystical friend**. He is akin to a fairy-like mystical being who is located within our hearts. He is all about feelings. This Jesus is separated from the Word and Sacraments and He is stripped of His humanity and divinity. He is just my conscience.

Jesus could become **feminized**. Instead of believing in the man Jesus, we get rid of gender. Seeing Jesus as a groom and the Church as a bride is a construct that needs to be diminished, for it can lead to a male-dominated oppressive structure. Instead, Jesus is just a nice person who spends His time cuddling little lambs and coddling emotions because He has been stripped of His masculinity.

Jesus could become your **Teddy Bear**. Instead of dealing with the reality of suffering, this Jesus is tame, safe and unchallenging. He is just cuddly!

So, what do you think about Jesus? Of course, each one of these examples is not the true Jesus. Jesus is much more than what *we* desire Him to be.

[The Questioned Identity of Jesus in the First Century]

Today, more and more people are catechized about Jesus from television shows and movies, rather than from God's Word. Recently, CNN's Don Lemon stated: "Jesus Christ, admittedly was not perfect when he was here on this earth."²

This is inherently false since Jesus never sinned. By implying that Jesus sinned, this means that He is not fully God, and only a flawed human being. So, our salvation is surely in doubt with comments such as this. Sadly, we often think of Jesus as He is portrayed in television and movies, rather than who He actually is as revealed in the Bible.

In the First Century, the people questioned the identity of Jesus. They didn't have television and movies to persuade them, but they guessed.

"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (Matthew 16:13-14).

So, why John the Baptist? Well, many, including Herod Antipas thought that Jesus was John the Baptist, whom he beheaded, somehow revived to life again, since they both preached repentance.

So, why Elijah? Well, there was speculation about the return of Elijah and this was live and well during the earthly ministry of Jesus.

² <https://disrn.com/news/cnns-don-lemon-jesus-christ-admittedly-was-not-perfect-while-he-was-here-on-this-earth>

And, why Jeremiah? Well, much of what Jesus did reminded many of the people of Jeremiah, especially in response to the unrelenting hostility that Jesus experienced in Jerusalem from the nation's religious leaders. And, Jesus echoed the ministry of Jeremiah and his declarations, such as the destruction of the Temple.

[Who is Jesus?]

Questions. Questions. Questions. Who is Jesus? Is there an answer?

Then Jesus turned the tables upon His disciples. He asked them, ***“But who do you say that I am?”*** (Matthew 16:15)

I'm sure they all looked at one another and then to Peter. Peter then spoke on behalf of the Twelve and said, ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”*** (Matthew 16:16).

At last, we have the answer! Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God! But, why is this so remarkable? We have already heard the disciples identify Jesus as the Son of God previously. Why is this special? Why is this unique?

Jesus answered Peter saying, ***“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven”*** (Matthew 16:17).

Here, Jesus is declaring that Peter is able to say what he has confessed only because of divine intervention. Peter's confession is only possible through the power of God the Father.

[The Confession]

Now we have an answer! But, what does ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”*** actually mean?

Among Judaism, the term “Christ” could mean many different things. It was possible to think of a *royal* Christ or a *priestly* Christ, or maybe a *prophetic* Christ. As the Jews were expecting only a particular type of Christ, they never expected the promised Christ to fulfill every prophecy. Jesus is fully Prophet. Jesus is fully Priest. Jesus is fully King. He is all three. He is three in one! ***“For all promises of God find their Yes in Him”*** (2 Corinthians 1:20).

Jesus continues speaking to the disciples saying, ***“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven”*** (Matthew 16:18-19).

Here, Jesus is speaking to not just to Peter, but to all the Twelve. So, what Peter confessed on behalf of the Twelve is their combined confession: ***“[Jesus is] the Christ, the Son of the living God.”***

Because of the combined confession, Jesus is promising that He will build His Church upon the rock of Peter – not Peter himself – but Peter’s confession: ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”*** So, now, Jesus is preparing the Twelve with the chief task to speak the truth about Jesus.

As part of this preparation, Jesus tells them that ***“the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”*** This “it” is the confession: *Jesus is the Christ*. This means that no matter the situation, Satan could never destroy Christ’s Church. As long as we continue to acknowledge Jesus as the Rock, or the Foundation, of our lives, the ***“gates of hell”*** will never prevail against us!

At the same time, due to this confession, Jesus is acknowledging that the apostles and other followers of Him will find themselves under assault. But, the forces of evil will never win the day over His assembly that is founded on the confession of Peter.

As fierce as this battle may be, the Christ will never allow Satan and his evil ways to ultimately gain the upper hand. This promise, however, does not protect the Church from evil. Due to our sinful nature, we will see denominations fracturing. We will see denominations become corrupt. This is happening now as our sinful nature would rather follow the authority of man than the authority of God. But, we will never see the end of the “one holy Christian and apostolic Church” (Nicene Creed). For the confession ***“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”*** will never pass away.

You see, ***“Built on the Rock the Church shall stand even when steeples are falling”*** (LSB 645) and ***“The Church’s One Foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord”*** (LSB 644). The assembly of the Church is built upon the rock of ***this*** confession! This faith in Jesus as the Christ is the foundation of the Church. As long as Jesus is the Rock and Foundation of His Church, the gates of hell shall never prevail against it!

So, no matter what happens, such as heresies, false teachings and schisms, God's true Church will not be offended by the authority of false churches. Or, the authority of false christs – like the mascot, mystical friend or Teddy Bear.

[Only God Reveals Jesus to Us]

So, who is Jesus? Our own flesh and blood cannot reveal this to us, but through the Gospel, God the Father has revealed the Son of Man, the Son of God, to us on earth.

The real Jesus is God in the flesh. The real Jesus is fully God and fully man. The real Jesus became man, so that He would die for our transgressions and rise to life for our justification.

The real Jesus came to teach the apostles to teach us that He alone is the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. It is only by grace through faith in Jesus that we have access to God the Father and to eternal life, salvation, and forgiveness of sins, itself. There is no other way to be saved. All other false christs only lead to eternal death and damnation, both apart from God. There is no goodness or mercy apart from the true Jesus Christ alone!

Jesus Christ alone looses us from all of our sins and preserves our life within His Church, against which even ***“the gates of hell shall not prevail”*** (Matthew 16:18-19). His salvation is forever!

So, when we assess the person, work, and nature of Jesus apart from the Bible, we typically come to identify Jesus wrongly. We underestimate the depravity of mankind. We ignore our sins against God the Father of our thoughts, words and deeds. We, instead, view ourselves as basically good. When this happens, we do not need a Jesus who is crucified and resurrected for poor miserable sinners.

Rather, we create a false Jesus, who gives us bling and acts like a Teddy Bear. These false christs are never sufficient. Only the true Christ is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-sufficient. The true Jesus alone is able to forgive us and resurrect us from sin and death.

The true Jesus is not a mere humanitarian, a wise teacher, or a charismatic leader. He is God. He is the Second Person of the Trinity. He is the promised Messiah. The suffering, death, and resurrection of a merely great man have little practical value for us. But since Jesus is God, then His vicarious suffering, death, and resurrection are of infinite value, availing for the sins of the whole world.

The true Jesus comes to us in His Means of Grace! Here, we receive forgiveness for our sins and strength for our weak faith! As the hymn “Built on the Rock” proclaims:

*Here stands the font before our eyes,
Telling how God has received us.
The altar recalls Christ’s sacrifice
And what His Supper here gives us.
Here sound the Scriptures that proclaim
Christ yesterday, today, the same,
And evermore our Redeemer. (LSB 645, stanza 4)*

You see, by grace through faith in the Rock, that is, the confession, “***[Jesus is] the Christ, the Son of the living God,***” we are received into the Kingdom of God through our Baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection. We also receive forgiveness, life, salvation, and strength for our faith when we partake of Christ’s very Body and very Blood in the Lord’s Supper. And, as the world around us changes, God’s Written Word never changes as Christ Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever!

This is Jesus! Jesus died, so that we may live! Jesus rose so that our faith in Him would not be in vain! Jesus destroyed the powers of sin, death, and Satan, so that everyone by grace through faith in Him would receive the peace that is forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation! Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠