

THE SEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY February 15, 18 & 19, 2006

St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI

WHO IS HE? Matthew 16:13-19

Who is that? When you see someone new, you may wonder, who that person is. If someone has been around a while and has become quite prominent and well known, you might have formed certain opinions and views about that person. So that when someone asks you who that person is, you are not only able to give their name, but you may also be able to tell the one asking, more about the person, his background, occupation and family.

In our reading for today Matthew records for us an incident in the life of Jesus that occurred well over two years after Jesus had begun his public ministry in Galilee and Judea. This was after Jesus had fed over 5,000 people with two fish and five loaves of bread, after he had raised Jairus's daughter from the dead; after he had calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee; after he had preached his Sermon on the Mount. Jesus had become quite a popular and well known figure in Judea and Galilee. Jesus had taken his disciples to the region of Caesarea Philippi about 105 miles north of Jerusalem. While he was with his disciples he asked a question of his disciples. The answer to this question has a great impact on a person's life. This is a question that you and I also need to carefully consider. The question is this **WHO IS HE?** Who is this Jesus of Nazareth? The disciples' answer to this question changed their lives and our answer to this question also changes our lives and has a great impact on each of us and our views regarding this world and life and death.

For our devotion we would like to focus our thoughts on the question that Jesus asked his disciples: **WHO IS HE?** Jesus reveals to us that **I) Our Correct Answer Is A Work Of God.** As we listen to our Savior respond to Peter's answer we also learn that **II) Our Answer Changes Our Lives.**

OUR CORRECT ANSWER IS A WORK OF GOD

Jesus had been carrying out his ministry for almost two and a half years since his baptism by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. Now our Savior has taken his disciples up north to the area of Caesarea Philippi. Jesus poses this question to his followers, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (v. 13b) What are the people saying about me, who do they think I am? The disciples quickly respond. Some

are saying that you are John the Baptist. Remember that John the Baptist had been beheaded by King Herod and some thought Jesus was John come back to life. Still others thought that he was the Old Testament prophet Elijah. The prophet Malachi had written four hundred years earlier that in the last days a prophet would come in the spirit of Elijah, so there were those who concluded that Jesus was that prophet. Even though Jesus had already told his followers that John the Baptist was the fulfillment of that prophecy concerning Elijah. Still others viewed Jesus as another of the Old Testament prophets who had come back to life like Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.

When you ask people today who they think Jesus is you hear similar answers. Some look on Jesus as a great prophet. He taught people to be good and nice. He laid down some interesting principles on life. Some look on him as a radical who upset the status quo. Others think he taught us how to get to heaven by living a certain way.

After Jesus heard the answers from his disciples of what others were saying, he gets more personal. He asks them, "But what about you? Who do you say I am?" (v. 15) Peter who is usually the spokesman for the disciples responds, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." (v. 16) What an answer! Peter acknowledges we are convinced that you are the Chosen One and you are the living God. For a Jew the word Christ meant a lot. It meant that this person was the seed of the woman promised to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This was the one whom God told Abraham would come from him and would be a blessing for all the people of the world. This was the great prophet that Moses had spoken of. This was the son of David who would sit on David's throne forever. This was the promised Savior and rescuer of the human race. This was the one who would save humanity by being pierced for our transgression and crushed for our iniquities. Peter not only recognized that Jesus was the Chosen One, he also knew that Jesus was the son of the living God. He was God almighty. He was one with the Father and the Holy Spirit in eternity. Peter confesses boldly that he is convinced that Jesus is the Savior of the world and the almighty God.

How had Peter come to that conclusion? Jesus tells us, "Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven." (v. 17) Jesus does not correct Peter and say, "You're mistaken. Your answer is incorrect. He validates Peter's answer as the truth. He tells Peter, "You are blessed because you believe this." Then Jesus reveals how Peter came to this conclusion. He says, "this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven." (v. 17b) Peter didn't decide to believe that Jesus was God and his Savior, it was God who gave him the faith to believe this.

It has been the same for you and me. We did not make a conscious decision to believe in Jesus Christ. It was God who gave us the gift of faith and trust in Jesus as our personal Savior and Lord. He has done that through the power of his almighty word. For many of us that happened at our baptism for others it occurred when the word of God was proclaimed to us by someone else.

Isn't it amazing to know that the very fact that you and I are able to say that we believe that Jesus Christ is God and our Savior is all the work of God in our lives? We cannot take any credit for the confidence and trust we have in Jesus. That is God's work in our lives just as Jesus said to Peter, "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." (v. 17b)

OUR ANSWER CHANGES OUR LIVES

This belief in Jesus as our Savior and Lord has changed our lives. It has had a dramatic impact on us just as it had an impact on Peter. Jesus said to Peter, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." (v. 18) The word Peter means rock in Greek. Jesus is using a play on words here. He says to Peter, "you are a rock" and on this Rock I will build my church." Now did Jesus build his church on Peter? No absolutely not. In fact when you look at the words that Jesus used you see that he uses the masculine form for the word rock to refer to Peter and then the feminine form to refer to the rock on which he will build his church. So the Rock that Jesus refers to is not Peter, but the truth that Peter confessed. That truth is the fact that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. The church is built on Jesus Christ and his Word. The church is not built on Peter nor his ideas or thoughts. It's not built on any of us and what we think or how we feel about things. The church of the living God is built on the Son of God, Jesus Christ. As the poet once wrote, "on Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground in sinking sand." It is Jesus Christ and his Word that are the rock on which we stand.

This truth has a definite impact on your life and mine. When we view this world and what it appears to offer we know that it cannot offer us true peace, security or hope. However Jesus Christ does. He gives us the peace of forgiveness. We are at peace with out God. He gives us eternal security. We have an eternal home waiting for us with the Lord in glory. We have the certain hope that one day all the trials, sicknesses and troubles of this life will come to an end and we will be set free to be with our Savior Jesus forever. Jesus is the rock that you and I stand on when everything else is crumbling around us. He keeps us safe and he always works everything for our eternal good.

Jesus also gives to Peter and all of us a life changing tool. He says to Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (v.19) What is that key that was given to Peter and which has also been given to each of us? It is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the good news of forgiveness in Jesus that looses or sets us free from the guilt and bondage of sin. It frees us from the eternal punishment that we justly deserve. It is also that good news that binds people's hearts and condemns them. They are condemned because they reject the forgiveness that God freely offers and either assume that they don't need it or that they can take care of these problems all by themselves. There are some who are so overcome with guilt and shame that they do not believe that God could or ever would forgive and remove all their sins from them. Judas was one such person who in despair and unbelief that God could not forgive his betrayal of Jesus, took his own life.

This key has been given by our Savior to you and me. We have the authority to tell people and assure them that they are forgiven when they come to us confessing their sins and admitting their guilt. We also have the authority to tell those who refuse to admit their sins and continue to live in them or defend their sinful lifestyles that they are not forgiven. This is an awesome responsibility that God gives to us his living stones.

As Jesus concludes his comments to his disciples he gives them a strange command. Matthew writes, "Then he warned them not to tell anyone that he was the Christ." (v. 20) Isn't that strange? Hasn't Jesus given us the command to preach the Gospel to all creation? Then why on earth does he tell his disciples to keep their mouths shut? There are two reasons. First the people of Jesus' day had a different idea about what the Christ who was to come would do. They thought that the Christ was going to be a political and military leader who would throw the Romans out of Palestine and make Israel a great nation as it had been under David and Solomon. Jesus did not wish to foster that idea and have people rally around him thinking that he was going to get rid of the Roman oppressors. Even our Lord's disciples did not have it all straight. Even after Jesus' death and resurrection and on the day he ascended into heaven they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6b) It wasn't until after Pentecost and the outpouring the Holy Spirit that they were able to begin to put the pieces together and understand what this all meant that Jesus is the Rock on which the church of the living God is built.

Who is this Jesus? He is our Savior and the Savior of the world. He is the almighty God come into the flesh to rescue us all. We build our lives on him and we proclaim the good news about him to others.

Amen.