



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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August 17, 2008

14th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 16:13-20

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Exodus 6:2-8

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 34

Second Lesson: Romans 11:33-36

Gospel: Matthew 16:13-20

Eternal Questions and Answers

About Jesus

About Us

There are certain questions that are eternal in nature, questions that keep being asked and they keep being asked in various ways, at different times, and in different places. An example might be; why doesn't anyone ever want to sit in the front of the church? Why are we surprised when our children can't see what's going on and they start hitting each other because they are in the back of the church? Other questions might be, are we there yet? For any child who has to ride over 25 minutes.

There are some more serious ones that we often pose that people all over the world, no matter where they are, ask themselves. Why are we here? Who are we? What are we here for? How am I going to get through this? Those are questions that have been asked in various languages, at various places, by various people, through every generation.

Our God points us to some eternal questions and eternal answers that make all the difference in how we answer those eternal questions. Eternal questions and answers first of all about Jesus, which leads us to eternal questions and answers about ourselves. Join me this morning as we look at this section of God's Word from Matthew 16 and see what some of these questions are and what the answers are.

We have been walking with Jesus in Matthew for quite awhile now, any number of weeks. We've seen Him do incredible things. We've seen Him walk on water. We've seen Him do many, many things. This morning we start in the region of Caesarea Philippi, a Gentile region. Jesus asks His disciples one of life's eternal questions, who is Jesus? How it is answered has eternal implications. The disciples put themselves in the sandals of other people that they had met and heard talking and they answered the question. "Some say John the Baptist. Others say Elijah. Still others say Jeremiah, one of the prophets."

Those are pretty tall compliments people are giving. These are some of the heroes of God's people that those people would have known about. These are people they would have read about while growing up. Jeremiah or Elijah—that's a very high compliment and it sounds really good, but if that's where the answer ends, no matter how good it sounds, it leads to hell. There are a lot of good sounding answers that take you straight to hell. This is one of them.

You can have a very high opinion of Jesus. Think He's a great teacher, a great revolutionary, a man ahead of His time and all this other blather, but if you don't know the real answer about who He is, you are going to hell. It's as simple as that.

We'd never give answers about Jesus that just describe Him as being important but not necessarily eternally important, would we? What are we saying about how important Jesus is when we don't find time to walk close to Him and His Word and His Sacraments? What are we saying about the eternal importance of Jesus when we say to our children, "It's important for you to do your homework and study and learn about Jesus in school or in Sunday school or in Wednesday school" or things like that and they have never seen us crack a Bible. Are we saying He's really, really important? Or are we saying it's important for you, but not for me? Are we ascribing Him to an importance that falls short of His true importance?

Obviously we are, aren't we? You and I do that even though we know better. We know the true answers, yet we often live in an answer that falls short of the true importance that God has ascribed to His one and only Son. And when we do that, we are telling all the people around us that really they are no different than the Muslim who says that Jesus is a great prophet. They will ascribe importance to Him also. But again, an importance that falls short.

Peter's answer hits the nail on the head. Although I have to wonder in my own mind if Peter really knew the full depth of his answer and the full depth of what Jesus said in response to his answer. Remember, these are the same guys that were standing there talking to Jesus that said, when He was about to ascend into heaven 40 days after His resurrection, "Are you at this time going to establish the kingdom?" If they knew He was the Christ, the Son of the living God, that's what Peter said, right? "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God;" the Christ—a Greek word that means Anointed One. The same as the Hebrew word Messiah, which means Anointed One. Christ or Messiah—that is the confession on which Jesus says that He will build His church. He will build His church on the confession that He is the Anointed One—the one who was anointed to be our prophet, our priest and our king—our prophet who teaches us the word, our priest who offers sacrifices and intercedes for us, and our king who rules over all things for us.

But think of the depth of that answer, "You are the Christ." The Christ came to live in our place and to die in our place. He came to offer up to God the sacrifice of His perfect life because you and I fall far short of perfection. He never attaches a lesser importance to the Father like you and I at times do. He lived perfectly without ever a sin of thought, word or action because that is what the Christ, the Messiah, had to do to pay for our sins. And then, as our priest, He offered Himself, with all of our sins, all of our evil thoughts, our evil words, our evil actions, all of the times that we have chased ourselves instead of chasing God, all the times that we loved me more than we loved God, and He took it to the cross and He endured the agony of hell that you and I deserve. That is what is in that confession, "you are the Christ, the Son of the living God." There is the eternal answer that makes all the difference for eternity when we believe that Jesus lived and died in our place. When the Spirit has through baptism or through the Word

worked that faith and strengthened it through the Word and through Baptism and through Sacraments, then the gates of heaven are open to us.

Who is Jesus Christ is not just “who do people say I am?” It’s not just a question where Jesus is looking to have his ego fed. He’s really teaching us that when it comes to questions that have eternal importance, don’t focus on us. Focus on Him and what His Spirit has led us to believe about Him.

You and I know that Jesus is the Christ. The Spirit lives in our heart through faith. We have the answer that opens heaven to us. That makes all the difference in the world for some other questions about who we are.

Who are we to do some of the things that we do? I once had a person ask me, “Who are you to say the things you said?” They sat on the pulpit side of our church about ten rows back. I talked to them before church. They were visitors from a reformed background and they said, “As long as you show us in the Word that what you are teaching is right, we’ll listen.” I thought it was great and would be fun because I love doing that. I live for that kind of stuff, teaching people the Word. But after the service, they were upset because during the service I said, “As a called servant of Christ and by his authority, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” “Who are you to forgive sins? Only God can forgive sins.” That’s what I was told.

They never gave me the chance to show them throughout God’s Word who I am and who you are to say to someone else, “In the place and by the command of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, you are forgiven.” When we understand that Jesus is the Messiah, God connects to it His promise that we have the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Whatever is bound on earth is bound in heaven. Whatever is loosed on earth is loosed in heaven. (See Matthew 16:19.) That’s what Jesus said not just to Peter but to all the disciples, and that has been given to all disciples of Jesus at all times. When we understand who Jesus is, when the Spirit lives in our heart by faith, we have the right, we have the responsibility, and we have the privilege to use these keys of the kingdom of heaven so that God’s kingdom is extended so that we go to more and more people and talk to them about who Jesus is and what is their relationship to Him and that when they are troubled by sin, we can say to them, “I forgive you. God forgives you.”

That’s the responsibility God has given us. But do we ever advocate that responsibility? Have you found yourself saying to someone that comes to you after they had done something that is a sin against you and they say, “I’m sorry, please forgive me”? Do you ever answer them with, “That’s alright, don’t worry about it.” That’s not the key of the kingdom of heaven. That’s really telling them that they really shouldn’t have been worried about even coming and talking to me. We’ve been given the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven. We have the power to say to our children and to each other, “I forgive you and just as certain, God in heaven has forgiven you for the sake of Jesus Christ.” Who we are is God’s mouthpiece. We are his arms for lifting up the broken and the weary—the people that we sang about in our Psalm today.

You and I are His voice to speak the things that Psalm 34 talks about. That's a privilege. That's a right. And we have it because God has given his keys to believers. That's who we are. We are his mouthpiece. It's a tall task. That's why we need the Spirit's help. That's why we need to be in the Word. That's why we need to be in the Sacraments. But through His power we can do it.

Another question that we might also ask ourselves is; how am I going to get through this? Whatever you are facing, sickness, uncertainty about jobs, uncertainty about a loved one, a child, a teenager, uncertainty about parents who are struggling with health. How am I going to get through this? How are we going to endure? Maybe sometimes you look around and watch the news and think, "Man oh man! How are we going to make it until Jesus comes back again? Look at how wicked everything has become. Woe is us." How are we going to get through all of this?

God gives us the answer to that eternal question also, doesn't He? When Peter makes his confession, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. You are the One who takes away the sins of the world" in essence, Jesus says to Him, "You are Peter, the rock, and on this rock" or boulder really, a different word for rock, "I will build My church." He is not going to build it on Peter because if you pull out your Bible this afternoon and read Matthew 16, in less than a couple of paragraphs Jesus will say to Peter, "Get behind me Satan! You don't have in mind the things of God but the things of men." (See Matthew 16:23.) So He definitely isn't building His church on Peter. He is building it on the confession that Peter made.

Then He said something that is just incredible. It's something that we need to hang onto like we are hanging onto a life preserver, bobbing in the ocean in 20-foot waves. "I will build My church on this confession, and the gates of Hades, the gates of hell, will not overcome it."

How are we going to get through this? We are the church of God. We believe that Jesus lived and died in our place like we heard a few weeks back in Romans in our text lesson. "*He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all...*" (Romans 8:32). If He loved us that much, is He going to help us through the things we go through now? Sure He will! The gates of Hades will not overcome us! Satan will seek and he will try to destroy us and separate us from God's love. He will use the devil, the world, our flesh, all these things will gang up to try to tell us that God doesn't love us or God is unfair or God is mean or God is a bully or whatever garbage line Satan thinks is going to work the best on us. God says to us, "*For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future...*" (Romans 8:38), and if we weren't paying attention to those first few pairs, he says, "*nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Romans 8:39). The gates of hell can't overcome us as long as we hang on to Jesus. That's His promise.

And His promise is beyond our promises because as we heard this morning, who has ever been God's counselor, who ever gives to God something that God should repay Him? (See Romans 11:33-36, Second Lesson.) None of us, but God, in His love, has given us His forgiveness, His Son. He has given us His Spirit and He has given us this

incredible promise that the gates of hell cannot overcome us. That's why we can get through whatever comes. God never promises us it will be easy. He never promises us everything is going to be fun. But He promises us that we will never be alone. He will be at our side to help us.

Then the other thing our God does for us that hopefully we have grown to appreciate is He puts us in a group of believers so that we can help and encourage one another. We can lift one another up when we are weary. We can hold one another up when we are troubled. We can point one another to the fact that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God who died for us.

So who are we? We are God's saints called to extend the Gospel. We are God's saints to take you to the confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

You might wonder about the last little session in this reading. Jesus warned them not to tell anyone He was the Christ. Why did He do that? Well, remember these are the same guys like I said earlier that said, "Are you at this time going to establish the kingdom?" They had a misunderstanding. They hadn't grown in their faith to the point to completely understand the meaning of the Messiah. Many were looking for a Messiah that would get rid of the Romans. All the Old Testament passages about a kingdom that extends from shore to shore and His rule is eternal—they weren't thinking heaven. They were thinking earth. So He had to warn them not to tell people about Him until He had risen. Then He said, "You will be my witnesses."

For you and me he told us "You are my mouthpiece to proclaim the Gospel." But at that time, they had a misunderstanding. But don't you say, "Well I might not understand everything perfectly. I don't think I should be talking about God." God has called you to talk. God has called you to let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly and to teach and admonish one another. God has called you to use the keys so that you help those who are saying, "How can I get through this." You are to use the confession that the church is built on and to trust that God will do the work.

So learn it, live it and let it be known.