

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ. “What are people saying about me,” Jesus asks his disciples, “who do they think that I am?” In the days before the internet, or television, or other means of mass communication, that might have been a fairly simple question to answer. And the disciples give some options, without a lot of variety between them. “Biblical Prophet” would pretty much cover the list, except for John the Baptist, who wasn’t in the Bible just yet. But ask that same question today and the first response would have to be, “how much time do you have, Jesus? People say a *lot* of things about you. There are so many different takes on you out there, and they can differ wildly from one another. Some think you’re a contentious rabbi. That is the take of Vanderbilt professor emerita Amy-Jill Levine, whose helpful study of Jesus’ parables we drew on in Adult Sunday School this summer. Some think you’re a wise moral teacher. Some others think you’re a political revolutionary, like Gandhi, or a Zealot who is trying to end the Roman occupation and make Israel great again. Still others see you as a conservative, family-values style evangelical, or, on the other end of the spectrum, a liberal, anti-war, community-organizer type, maybe even a socialist! And there are even some who think you never actually existed, that you’re a mythical archetype or a literary trope.

But what if Jesus asked his present-day followers the same question, “who do you say that I am?” like he asked his disciples? Again, I think the response would have to begin with, “how much time do you have?” because the answer isn’t a short one. People who study this sort of thing estimate that there are something like 300 Christian denominations worldwide, grouped into a handful of categories, each of them with a different take on who Jesus is and what he is up to.

Peter pipes up in our Gospel reading with what appears to be the right answer to Jesus’ question. “You are the Christ,” he answers, “God’s anointed one, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus seems pleased with that answer, and maybe a little bit surprised. “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!” he exclaims. But you didn’t come up with that answer on your own. You had help; divine intervention.” Peter has been blessed with a glimmer of insight into who Jesus is, a kernel of faith, if you will. We’re going to find out next week that he has very little idea at this point about the meaning of the confession he has just uttered. But that’s okay. It is enough for now, enough for Jesus to turn the tables. Having heard who Peter, with God’s help, says Jesus is, we now get to hear who Jesus says Peter is, and who we are.

Jesus says three important things about Peter and us here that I want to turn our attention to now: One, Peter is blessed, two, Jesus will use that blessing to build his church, and three, Jesus’ church has a very specific mission.

First, Peter is blessed. Now, we’ve come across this word “blessed” before in this year of Matthew, most notably back at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount in chapter 5. “Blessed are poor in spirit” Jesus tells his disciples. “Blessed are the meek; those who mourn; the merciful; the peacemakers” and so on. Those beatitudes would have been surprising, because they all were about people who didn’t seem to be the objects of God’s blessing. Yet here was Jesus challenging their assumptions about the world, and about God. It is these crowds of people down at the foot of the mountain desperate for Jesus’ help whom God will work for and through, Jesus promises, and not the kings with their mighty armies, and not the rich and well fed, in spite of their propaganda. I’ve just spent a lot of time roaming around some English cathedrals where the prominent citizens of old jockey for position even in death, but that’s maybe another sermon. Except maybe it’s not, because we still think the blessed are the rich and powerful, don’t we? We still have world leaders

claiming to be God's anointed, and lots of people believing that they are and that they should use their power to enforce God's will. Let's at least be clear for the moment that blessed Peter here is not blessed in that way or for that purpose. Peter's blessing is the kernel of faith planted in him by the Holy Spirit after hanging out with Jesus for a while, and witnessing the promise of God's coming reign in Jesus' words and deeds. That is what allows him to make his confession of Jesus' identity as God's agent, even if he is far from understanding how that will work itself out in the rest of Jesus' story in Matthew and in the life of the church that will follow.

Second, God will use this strange blessing of faith given to Peter as the foundation of his church, of those called out from the ways of the world to a new way of life that embodies what God has always intended for the world. If you're used to thinking of the saints of the church as models of unattainable perfection that we should all nevertheless strive for, then I'm sorry. I don't know why that idea refuses to die, because it doesn't jibe very well with the picture of those saints we get from the Bible. Because as Martin Luther rightly pointed out, what makes the saints the saints is not what they have done for God, but what God has done for them. And Peter is example number one. Jesus doesn't even give him credit for his right answer, because God gave it to him! Here's where our first reading from Isaiah is relevant and why I think it was chosen. Isaiah portrays the faith of Abraham and Sarah as a quarry from which God's chosen people were mined. And as we well know, that faith also began as a kernel, and was far from perfect in its development. So, if that sounds like your story too, you are in very good company. God can use your imperfect little kernel of faith to do amazing things.

And that brings us to the third thing Jesus says about Peter and us. The church that Jesus builds on the rock of God's promise and gift of faith has a mission. And that mission is to go to Hell. You heard me right, and many of you have heard me say this before about this passage. "On this rock I will build my church," says Jesus, "and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." How do you read that? Is your instinct to say that the church will be protected from the forces of Hades? It doesn't say that. It says the opposite. Gates are defensive, not offensive. The promise is that the gates of Hades will not prevail against the church, which means that the mission of the church is to be on the offensive against Hell in all of its manifestations, wherever sin, death, and evil are at work in people's lives. And when we are about that mission, the promise is that those gates will not hold, either to keep the church out or to keep those inside imprisoned by their past. And the weapon the church will use is not a siege engine or cannon or missile or any other tool of violence. The weapon given to the church is what comes next, the gift of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, the power of loosing, or forgiving, sin. "Ah, but wait a minute, Pastor. Jesus said binding *and* loosing, so we get to withhold forgiveness too, don't we?" That's not how I read this. I think that forgiveness is so important that Jesus wants to make sure we get that. Here is the power of forgiveness, he says to the church. Use it. Because if you don't use it, forgiveness won't happen. Whatever you loose is loosed. And whatever you bind is bound. So, by all means, loose and don't bind. I grant that that's not the only way to read this, and there is an argument to be made for how we have understood this traditionally, but the upshot is still that conveying God's forgiveness is always the ultimate goal. And we can do this because that's who Jesus says we are, and because Jesus himself blazed the trail for us to Hell and back again by his death and resurrection, opening to us the kingdom of heaven and creating a future where there was none before. May God grant us Peter's kernel of faith to trust these promises. May we take comfort in who Jesus says we are. And, to quote Miracle Max from the Princess Bride, may we "have fun storming the castle." And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, now and into the future that is opened to us. Amen.