

Who Do You Say? – Matthew 16:13-20

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Richard Ward is a retired professor of preaching and worship. And in a commentary on this text, he wrote about an experience he had with a friend:

Sunday was coming and I was filling the pulpit for the pastor of my church. I was also playing host to some dear friends who were visiting from out of state. My friend and I were taking a walk together along a favorite trail and going over plans for the weekend.

"I'd like to come hear you preach," he said. My friend is a devout Jew. I hesitated. "Well," I muttered, "I'll be preaching about Jesus."

"So?" "Well, I'm afraid of saying something that would offend you."

*We stopped walking for a moment. "I'd be very disappointed in you if you **didn't** preach about Jesus!" We started walking again.*

"Honestly," he said, "I don't know why it is that my Christian friends are so afraid of talking about Jesus with me!" He added. "I'm not afraid to talk about my faith with you."

*I don't know why it is that my Christian friends are so afraid to talk about Jesus! There are, to be sure, those Christians who are **not** afraid and in fact are willing and able to put Jesus at the center of any conversation. Others of us are more reluctant. Why? Is it because we just don't know what to say in our politically polarized environment? How DO we confess our faith in such an environment?*

In this setting or an adjacent one that features members of our community, it's easier, I suppose, to talk about Jesus' significance. But, get us outside the comfort of this community,

are we as reluctant as Richard Ward was in front of his Jewish friend to talk about Jesus?

Jesus gives Peter a big “attaboy” here in Matthew 16 when he confesses Jesus as Messiah, so much so that Jesus declares that he would build his church upon him, giving him the keys to the kingdom and guaranteeing that the gates of Hades would not prevail against it.

Some of us are like Peter. We don’t hold back either in talking about Jesus as savior, talking about all Jesus has done, and talking freely about his unique identity as God’s son. But many of us, especially in mainline Protestant traditions, are probably too hesitant to engage in Jesus talk.

Why is that? Is it because Jesus has been commandeered by more evangelical traditions? And we fear that if we speak of him, we’re going to be labeled as being part of a tradition that is not ours? Same with politics: People on one side of the political aisle seem to have co-opted Jesus and taken him as their own. And maybe we don’t want to be associated with that voting bloc. Hence, we’re reluctant to talk about Jesus.

Does this reluctance have anything to do with our reluctance to appear as though we believe God’s salvation is exclusive to those who believe in Jesus as Messiah? We don’t want to come off as superior, or all-knowing, or, in the case of Richard Ward, not wanting to appear anti-Jewish, or anti-Muslim, or anti-whatever faith tradition. (“You can too easily build a shabby shack of anti-Semitism on the “rock” of Peter’s confession as you can a faithful community.”)

Or, maybe we don’t talk about Jesus as much because we’ve been told about a version of Jesus that we don’t understand or continue to wrestle with or don’t agree with.

The book my Sunday School class has been discussing is called *Being Presbyterian in a Dysvangelical World*. Playing on the word *evangelical*, which essentially means sharing the Good News, the authors of the book use the prefix *dys* to describe how the good news has been turned into something problematic and even dangerous. *Dys* means distorted, dysfunctional, and dystopian, turning the good news into the opposite of what it means to be evangelical.

When Peter confesses Jesus as Messiah in Matthew 16, he's confessing him as Savior. And in the Western world, we most think of Jesus being Messiah or Savior in a very personal and individualistic way. We all would want that, of course, to be saved—if it means receiving the grace of Jesus not only for each of us but also for the world.

“Too often, though, personal salvation is the defining characteristic and goal of a dysvangelical belief system. In its simplest form, it addresses whether one's individual soul will be sent to hell or go to heaven in the afterlife. Related to this is the belief that a time will come when the world ends and Jesus will return, so you better be sure to be one of those saved.” (Foote and Thornburg)

So, faith in Jesus, proclaiming him as Messiah, is simply viewed as hell insurance. That confession gets you to heaven and, just as importantly, keeps you from going to hell.

Jesus being strictly the arbiter of our personal, eternal destination by us saying Jesus is Messiah doesn't seem right to many of us.

The Good News of the Gospel is not reflective of this in the Bible. “In this dysvangelical system, God is an angry and vindictive actor ready to punish those who refuse to swear

allegiance and do what they are supposed to do. God is like a parent who rewards or punishes depending on whether one is a believer. But, according to the Jesus we find in the gospels, does God really leave anyone behind?"

"The people and communities of Scripture would have found this perspective somewhat alien. Salvation was understood as communal and our personal relationship with God as experienced in relational ways in being part of a community." (Foote and Thornburg)

That's how I see Jesus. That's how I experience him as Messiah. It's through the ways Christ is present in the people around me demonstrating the qualities Jesus demonstrated: compassion, service, justice, and righteousness.

When I saw hundreds of people here yesterday for a Service of Witness to the Resurrection that also gave thanks for the life of John Thomason, I saw Jesus. People leaning on each other, particularly a grieving family, giving them strength and bolstering their hope in their moment of great sadness. That's Christ as Messiah being visible.

That's how Christ saves as much if not more so than in what happens when we die.

Christ as Messiah is not merely a transactional identity ("If I say this, I get this.") We would talk more freely about Jesus if that didn't dominate our thinking about him.

Peter Marty, the editor of *The Christian Century*, wrote in his recent column, *As I track the movements of Jesus in the gospels, I'm struck by how many people pursue him for what they believe they might get from him, rather than who they might become through him. When the multitudes eat plentifully of the loaves and fishes he serves up, a number of them jump in boats the next day and head to Capernaum to*

see if he'll fill their stomachs a second time. Jesus is ready for them: "You are looking for me not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate all the food you wanted" (John 6:26).

Constantly angling to get something from Jesus continues to inform (or misinform) too many lives of faith. It's this bad habit of ours that prompted Eugene Peterson to decry the use of prayer as a tool for "doing or getting [instead of] being and becoming."

The power of becoming something new with the arrival of each new day is one of the recognized privileges of having Christ live in the lives of those who follow him.

Christ as Messiah, as the one who allows us to be transformed, to become something new, to become more like him in how we treat each other and take care of each other, as individuals but more importantly as a community, now that's something that can lead more of us to speak of Jesus openly, to boldly proclaim with exclamation that he is the Messiah.

In Matthew's account of this encounter between the disciples and Jesus in chapter 15, he says a curious thing in the last verse, verse 20. After he awards Peter the keys to the kingdom due to his bold confession, he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

It seems like a rather weak culmination to the story. You'd think he would've told them to share with others what Peter has so emphatically confessed. But, no, don't tell.

Scholars remind us that during the first century, the Jewish people were living under the oppressive rule of the Roman Empire. Popular cultural and theological expectations dictated that the Messiah would be a military conqueror or political liberator. If the disciples had immediately broadcasted that Jesus was the Messiah, it likely would have triggered a premature

political uprising or a violent revolt, distracting from Jesus' ultimate purpose. Plus, the disciples, as we would see, still really weren't clear what Jesus as Messiah meant, even after Peter's confession.

Jesus' stern order here was a cautionary tale to the disciples and to us as readers today: Messiah might not mean what you've been told it means. It might be more than what's on the surface. It's a savior who reflects more than a transactional relationship. It's not just for me but for us. It's the work of God here today in addition to what comes later at our earthly end. It's a God who changes us into better reflections of the one who not only died for the salvation of the world but lived for it.

That's maybe more accurately who we can say he is.