

Grace Episcopal Church  
The Thirteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 16 (Year A, RCL)  
August 27, 2023

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Rock, and Our Redeemer. Amen.

All summer now, since the second week in June, we've been hearing about the ministry of Jesus and the disciples. We started back in Matthew chapter 9, with this summary statement: "Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness." The cities and villages were in Galilee: Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. They crisscrossed the Sea of Galilee in boats. Things changed a little last week. For the first time in our consideration, Jesus and the disciples travelled outside of Galilee. They went up north and west, to the region of Tyre and Sidon, where they met the Canaanite woman and got a lesson in tribalism. Today they're north of Galilee again, away from home, this time in the highlands near Mount Hermon, near Caesarea Philippi. And there was another difference this morning: they were alone. No crowds, no religious officials, no pesky women. Just Jesus and the disciples, on a retreat together, a time away that turned out to be significant. (That sometimes happens on retreats.) Both Matthew and Mark depict the time at Caesarea Philippi as the turning point in Jesus's ministry. Several important things happened up there, so we're going to consider it for two Sundays, this morning and next week.

It was on this retreat that the famous exchange of identities occurred. Jesus asked the disciples what people were saying about him, and Simon gave his famous answer, "You are the Christ, the messiah, son of the living God." I remember a joke going around seminary, that Peter gave Jesus his last name at Caesarea Philippi: Christ. Those crazy seminary guys! Anyway, after Simon acknowledged that Jesus was God's Anointed One, he received his own clarification of identity. He got his own new name. Simon had seen past what other people were saying about Jesus. He thought beyond what others were thinking; there was more to Jesus than just his similarity to other prophets. Simon looked and saw through it all and detected Jesus's peculiarity, his divine identity, the fact that he was the One who would fulfill the divine purpose. Jesus acknowledged Simon's deeper insight, and reminded him that he had not arrived at his insight on his own. He got there by divine revelation. Retreat and reflection are not enough. They're necessary but not sufficient, if we are to get past the surface similarities to the peculiar identity grounded in active purpose.

Then Jesus said, "Bless you Simon, Son of Jonah. You're the Rock, Peter, the foundation of this developing movement, this divine initiative that the gates of Hades will not withstand, this saving expansion of the Kingdom of Heaven. Peter, just like me, your true identity is linked to your role in God's divine initiative." Then Peter received something else. He got more than a new name. He received clarification of what his name meant. Jesus offered Peter a deeper understanding of his role in the initiative by means of a vivid image, an image linked to new, deeper responsibility. Jesus said, "I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven." Peter got a new realization of what his job was. He was issued keys to the plant; he could come in early and leave late. He shared responsibility for security. Whatever else that transfer of keys means, it means at least that Peter was to be the leader of the band who were charged with unlocking the kingdom of heaven, God's salvation for the world. And of course, after that, keys were Peter's personal icon. When people started depicting the apostles in artwork, Peter was always represented with two keys. On murals, in sculpture and in paintings, he's either holding keys, or they're hanging around his neck or off his belt. They became his new fashion accessory; an essential part of his new brand.

At the end of today's lesson, Jesus told the disciples to stay quiet about his true identity. He said, "Tell no one that I am the Messiah." It was on more instance of what comes to be called the messianic secret. And like Peter as the foundation of the church, and Peter receiving the keys, this messianic secret is difficult for us to fully comprehend. It's another of the things that happened on that retreat that are a little bit beyond us. But the fact that parts of what happened up there are difficult does not relieve us from the responsibility to receive and act upon the other parts, the parts that are clear. We could probably have another supper-Bible-study series just on the retreat at Caesarea Philippi. We could probably spend another five weeks just on the second half of Matthew 16. You'll need to come back next week to hear about the rest of what happened. Some of it is dense and difficult, but the basic message is clear, and we need to hear it and act on it.

I hear two basic, clear points this morning. First: identity is related to mission. Identity and mission go together. Who we are and what we do go together. It was true for Jesus and it's true for us. Who is Jesus? Jesus is God's Son, the one set apart to accomplish God's purpose. Who are we? We are followers of the Anointed One; we are his Body. The Book of Acts tells us that those who followed the risen Christ were given their corporate name because they were like the one they followed. They were "little christs" . . . "Christ-ies" . . . Christians. They got their name because they did what the Anointed One did. Their identity came from their actions. They were not called "Jesus-ians." Their identity was linked with their engagement in God's initiative of bringing about the Kingdome of Heaven in Christ. Ours is too, or ought to be. What's in a name? I'll tell you what's in a name—calling is in a name, our name. Identity is related to mission.

Second, we learn who Jesus is and who we are in the presence of Jesus. Discovery of true identity, divine and human mission-centered identity, occurs where the Son of the Living God is. It happened for that little band of missionaries on retreat near Caesarea Philippi. Or we should probably say it *began* to happen there. The followers of Christ began to realize who Christ was and who they were, and that realization continued throughout the rest of their time with him. And it expanded and deepened during the week of Christ's passion, and it came into greater clarity during the weeks and months and years after his resurrection and ascension, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. And the Christian Church continued to realize who he is and who it is, and we are still realizing those things today.

Seeing beyond the surface and the shared consensus happens where the risen Christ is. Understanding more than what crowd-sourced pseudo-wisdom gins up, or what given names might offer—that occurs where Jesus told us it would: here, where and when we gather together, around this table, open and receptive to the presence of Christ and each other, in holy communion. This is where and how life-giving insight into who Jesus is and who we are happens. We embrace the identities that matter and are grounded in them. And we are inspired, in-spirited to live in and from them, as we work through that Spirit to help bring about the Kingdom of Heaven. May God's Spirit continue to reveal the Anointed One to us, and to empower us in his name, as his Body, for this good work. Amen.