

Seeking Answers to Big Questions
Matthew 16:13-20
Pentecost 10 Proper 16A
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The other day, while driving across town, my daughter Ellie looked out the window and said excitedly, “Look! There’s the moon!” Then she paused and asked, “Dad, who made the moon?” I replied, “Well, God made the moon?” She countered, “Did Jesus make the moon, too?” I replied, “Yes, Jesus was there to make the moon too.” I was starting to sweat a little though because her questions were getting bigger and harder to explain to a three year old. Then came a whopper, “Dad, who made Jesus?” she asked. And there I was having the deepest theological conversation I’d had all week with my three year old. It doesn’t take long for us to start seeking answers to really big questions.

Jesus traveled with his disciples to Caesarea Philippi where he asked them a big question. “Who do you say that I am?” At first, this seems like a fairly benign question. They’ve been following him for some time now and it should be pretty clear to them. But, Caesarea Philippi was a place where people who worshiped all kinds of different gods gathered to perform rituals. In one place in the region there was a large rock face, called the Rock of the Gods. It had carved shrines all over it. In one place there’d be people worshiping Caesar – the political and divine ruler of the Roman Empire. People would come to pay homage to Caesar and worship in newly constructed temples. In doing so, they may have been trying to seek favor with the Roman authorities, perhaps gaining political or economical power. Some would worship Pan or Nemesis – Greek mythological figures who were nature and fertility gods. People came here to perform bizarre and unthinkable sexual rituals to gain favor with these gods. In another place on the rock was a cave where water spewed from it. This was called the Gates of Hades, where it was thought that the god Baal would enter and exit the underworld. Baal was known as the god of rain and when drought hit this arid land, it was thought that he’d

been defeated and been sent to the underworld. People would gather here during drought to worship and see when Baal would return the rain to the land. One more thing about Caesarea Philippi – it did not have a squeaky clean reputation. You might think of it as having the reputation of Las Vegas 20 years ago or Bourbon Street in New Orleans. Good, upstanding Jews did not show up in Caesarea Philippi.

So when Jesus showed up with his disciples here, they may have wondered, “What in the world are we doing here?” It’s with this back drop that Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” He’s asking this in light of multiple belief systems, moral codes, rituals and traditions, some of which could be very appealing and appalling all at the same time.

It’s interesting that everything and nothing has changed in 2000 years. Today we live in a much more connected global world. We can find in five minutes surfing the internet than the disciples could learn about the world in their combined lifetimes. But, we also live in a community and a world of multiple belief systems, moral codes, rituals and traditions. Our gods don’t always have names like Baal or Caesar, but many continue to worship what these gods represent: money, power, sex. We live in a pluralistic world where it isn’t that easy for everyone to answer Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am?”

Jesus’ question to his disciples is just as important and big now as it was then. Because how we answer this question determines how we deal with all the other gods courting our attention in our lives. More importantly, how we answer this question determines how we live out being the church in the world. Do we try to fit Jesus into one of the molds that help us attain power, wealth and self-satisfaction? Or do we trust that those markets are full enough and that Jesus has come for another purpose?

On Wednesday night, Pastor Eric Anspach-Hanson came to share stories of his work as a missionary in the Lutheran Church in Japan. He talked about the culture and how group oriented the people are, how people are organized, civil and highly

educated. During the Q&A, someone asked, “The people seem to have everything they need. They have good jobs, they support one another and their society is well organized. What does the Christian faith have to offer them?” After a pause, Eric collected his thoughts and talked about how all this order and group life also comes with very high expectations and when those expectations are not met, people face a great deal of shame and isolation. He told of a woman who was having troubles with her husband and started coming to Eric’s Bible study. They were talking about Judas’ betrayal of Jesus that night. Some were talking about how he was suffering in hell for what he did. But someone else opened a book that showed a painting of Jesus reaching down into hell to pull Judas into heaven. Then the person said, “Many may hate Judas. But we know that Jesus loved Judas.” Tears started streaming down the woman’s face. She felt like Judas. But she never thought there was any hope for her because of the deep sense of shame she experienced. Eric said, this is why the church matters. I get to tell people, who have never heard it, that Jesus loves them and that Jesus has died for them no matter what. When you live in a culture of impossibly high expectations; this matters.”

Sometimes, it doesn’t seem like the question “Who do you say that I am?” matters much at all. Jobs are stable, family is fine, there’s food on the table and money in the bank. All seems well ordered and faith may seem like a bonus in life. But so often when we take a closer look, these things that are important in our lives aren’t all right or they aren’t enough to fill us full and make us whole.

Friends, when we don’t pay attention to this big question in our lives we have the tendency to loose the way. We drift toward other gods. We forget that Jesus has died for us. We forget that Jesus has called us into a way of life that is to make a difference in the world.

Jesus wants us to be able seek and find answers to this big question because Jesus wants to build the church in this fragile world on the confession that Jesus is the son of the living God. And in this confession he promises that the Gates of Hades, or any other portal to another god, will not deliver the kind of sustained fullness of life that Christ offers.

Do you trust this? Can you see the difference Christ's church makes in your own life?

This week I was part of a group that listened to mission developers who are starting churches in the Twin Cities and Fargo. They talked about the people they feel called to serve and how they're doing ministry. One of the church leaders I heard from was Greg Meyer, pastor of Jacob's Well, in south Minneapolis. He said that when he started the church, he wanted his neighbors to join his church. He knew what kind of people these were, they were well educated, young professionals who worked a lot, had busy families, had high ideals of themselves and the world but had no idea how to live them out and they didn't think they needed church or God. He said that the confession of faith that his neighbors had heard from the church was one that he would reject as well. It was a confession that was full of partisan politics, conditional grace, little hope and no imagination for the world that God is working to make whole again. He was heart broken and believed that his neighbors needed to hear and witness a different confession - one that was rooted in God's transforming grace and love and lived out in authentic, transparent relationships.

After five years, more than 200 people call themselves part of the community of Jacob's Well, many of whom are Greg's neighbors. God's grace and love is prevailing against the forces that would say there is no reason to believe in God. God's love is transforming hearts and minds of people who thought that God wasn't necessary in their lives.

Friends, we live in a complex and fragile world filled with all kinds of big questions. We need to be the church that shares our confession of who Jesus is because too many people are dying out there and they don't know it. Too many people are thirsty for something they don't realize will refresh them. Too many people are asking big questions about God and life and meaning and don't have anywhere to ask them. We know that God has given us life and faith and hope. The seeking starts and ends with Jesus. In the market place of ideas and gods who demand our attention, we need to listen for the voice of Jesus, the son of the living God, the only one who provides what the world really needs – mercy for a world with too little mercy, hope for people who are hopeless, grace for those filled with shame, and a life of purpose connected to the needs of the world around us. This is the Jesus that I have come to know. This is the Jesus have come to confess. How about you? Amen.