

“Lessons from a Beloved yet Controversial Text”

Matthew 16:13–20

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The reading from Matthew 16 is one of the most beloved in scripture yet also one of the most controversial. Jesus asks who people say the Son of Man is and the disciples reply, “Some say John the Baptist but others Elijah and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Then, Jesus asks who the disciples say he is, and Peter replies, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus subsequently affirms Peter, saying God has revealed this to him, on this rock he will build his church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. Furthermore, he will give him the keys to the kingdom of heaven and whatever he binds on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever he looses on earth will be loosed in heaven — this being rabbinic terminology for doctrinal and disciplinarian authority.

Wonderful! But what does it mean? Is Jesus saying the church will be built on Peter or on faith like his? Is authority to given to Peter and his successors, as in Popes within Roman Catholic tradition, or to all the disciples and by implication the whole church? A lot hinges on these questions, they form the core of the dispute between Catholics and Protestants, along with Henry VIII’s desire for a different wife, but the other versions of this story found in the New Testament, Mark 8:27–33 and Luke 9:18–22, don’t even include Jesus’ words of affirmation.

We probably won’t resolve this issue today. There isn’t enough to prove who is right and who is wrong. The most objective assessment of the text suggests that Peter plays a more prominent role in the early church than Protestants often assume but there is little to support the Catholic view of apostolic succession. We may have to live with our differences and look for good in other parts of the body of Christ.

But the shame of this history of dispute is not just divided witness in the church but the fact that there is so much here to speak to all of us about the nature of Christian faith if we can get past our differences.

One central claim of this text is that what we believe, especially about Jesus, matters, as does our willingness to profess our belief at some point. The context alone is telling — Caesaria Philippi, modern-day Banias, a site where there are altars to many gods. One to the Greek god Pan is the most prominent, a place where goats, poor little guys, were sacrificed. Zeus is also honored with images of Nymphs, and there are symbols of Roman authority and ultimately Caesar's role as a god.

In this arena where there are so many figures competing for loyalty, Jesus asks, "So, what do you think of me? Where do I stand in this world of competing loyalties? Am I just another voice crying out for attention?" Peter's reply is startlingly clear. "No! You stand alone! You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!" It is a critical moment of recognizing Jesus' identity, Son of Man and Son of God, human and divine, and Peter gets it right. Of course, he doesn't know what any of this means now, that much is clear in what comes after our reading, we'll get to that, but what he says is important, as is that he says it.

It is important for us too. There are many voices competing for our loyalty and time. Where does Jesus fit into this? Does he stand alone as the first priority for our time and everything else or is he just somewhere on the list of competing loyalties? And who exactly do we say he is? How we view Jesus' character and identity shapes our understanding of what it means to follow him.

Is he simply a man or is God somehow distinctly in him? Is he a demanding judge or a gentle shepherd who brings grace and truth? Is he a macho man wielding power or a humble servant who lays down his life for others? What we believe about him matters.

We may think belief is not all there is to faith. It is not. We can argue that we may not even understand our verbal confession. Peter certainly does not. But what we believe still matters. Beliefs are the skeletal structure of faith without which nothing else holds together. Two of our texts — Isaiah and Matthew — use the imagery of rock for faith. Faith needs a solid foundation.

And when it comes to the importance of professing faith, through baptism in our tradition, how would we feel if a prospective life partner were to say, "You know I love you. Why should I have to say I love you,

especially in some formal way like a marriage ceremony?” That may be enough for some people, but for most of us, if someone truly loves us, we’d like them to be willing to stand up and say so! So might God, but the truth is being willing to profess our faith is more important for us.

Yet beliefs and professions of faith are not all there is to Christian discipleship. Consider Peter’s experience. After our reading in which Peter says Jesus is the Messiah and Jesus praises him for doing so, Jesus says he will have to suffer and die at the hands of some leaders, and then be raised on the third day, at which point, Peter rebukes him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” Hearing this, Jesus says, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

It’s a tough day in school for Peter with a whirlwind of emotions. One moment he is the teacher’s pet, the next moment he is an instrument of evil. Before getting to any details, it’s difficult to imagine how Peter can think Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and then talk to him like he is a fool. But regarding the details, while Jesus delivers the world from bondage through his suffering on a cross, the role of Messiah is not associated with suffering and death at this time. Only after Jesus’ death and resurrection do Christians connect the passages in Isaiah about a suffering servant to Jesus as Messiah. So, we can’t blame Peter for thinking Jesus has lost his mind, just for saying so this boldly.

But it is obvious that Peter does not yet know what kind of Messiah Jesus is, which may be why Jesus instructs the disciples not to tell anyone, and thus, he doesn’t know what it will mean to follow him. Faith calls for our profession of belief, but it also calls for much more, a certain level of understanding, and a willingness to act on what we know. It’s not just about what we believe, but how we live.

In the synoptic Gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke — Jesus’ invitation is, “Follow me,” not “believe this or that about me.” In John, where the Jesus story is reframed for a different people and time, Jesus calls people to believe, but not simply to affirm certain things about him, but to believe *in* him, to trust in him and his way of life.

English minister Leslie Weatherhead put it this way.

I believe passionately that Christianity is a way of life, not a theological system with which one must be in intellectual agreement. I feel that Christ would admit into discipleship anyone who sincerely desired to follow him, and allow that disciple to make his creed out of his experience; to listen, to consider, to pray, to follow, and ultimately to believe only those convictions about which the experience of fellowship made him sure (*The Christian Agnostic*, p. 16).

Some people hear this argument and think it dilutes the essence of Christian faith, dumbs it down, makes beliefs relative, and this can be a byproduct of such a shift in focus. Weatherhead is interested in leaving room for diversity of belief. He gives people space to sort out their own convictions, which is a very Baptist thing to do. But what Weatherhead calls for does not lower the standards of Christian faith. It raises them. Anyone can believe certain things about God. As C.S. Lewis once said, even the Devil believes God exists. Trusting in God to direct our lives requires more, and because it does, it has the power to transform us.

Again and again, Jesus says, "Follow me." Right after Jesus tells Peter he is a stumbling block, he says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and *follow me*." That's what it means to believe *in* Jesus. It's to follow him in the way of self-giving love. Maybe that's part of why Peter rebukes Jesus. He doesn't want suffering in his life any more than he wants it for Jesus.

Beliefs matter because we have to know who we are following and on what path, but Peter's experience tells us faith is more about a way of life; then it tells us faith is an ongoing process of ups and downs. There are key moments when we are called to make decisions and take a stand somewhere. For Peter the conversation at Caesaria Philippi is such a moment. But this is not the end of the story.

Immediately after Peter professes that Jesus is the Messiah, he undercuts his witness by failing to grasp Jesus' mission and rebuking him. He then follows Jesus through many twists and turns but denies even knowing him three times when Jesus is arrested. When he is told

the tomb is empty, Peter runs to find out if this is true and later greets the Risen Christ with joy only to be asked three times if he loves him, and if he does, he is told to demonstrate this love by feeding his sheep, an apparent reflection of his three denials. The path is not straightforward for Peter, he moves three steps forward and two steps backward, but he keeps trying to follow Jesus the best he can which is what matters.

Such is the case for us. There are key moments on our journey like baptism or when we embrace our sense of calling or when we feel a need to renew our faith, moments when we become clearer about what we believe and feel a need to tell others about it. But growing up into Christ in every way, which is how Ephesians 4:15 describes discipleship, is a lifelong process which is not always straightforward. In the reading from Romans 12, the Apostle Paul talks about not being conformed to this world but being transformed by the renewing of our minds. This doesn't happen in a single moment.

I'm not saying we must constantly try to earn God's favor. We already have that. Some would say we receive it when we accept Christ as Savior and Lord or when we are baptized. I would say that we embrace God's love in these moments, but God already loves us for who we are. We never have to earn this. It is a gift of grace. But in the context of grace, we grow more and more into the people God envisions us to be, and it is a lifelong journey on which there are many ups and down.

Maybe that's why we find Peter so intriguing. He makes a mess of things quite often but keeps trying and thus remains with Jesus. It seems like an appropriate model for us.

Near the end of Goethe's *Faust*, one might think the protagonist is headed to eternal punishment. He has made a deal with Mephistopheles, sought love with Gretchen and Helen of Troy, in addition to all sorts of knowledge and wisdom, surely he is done for... but just as he is dying and the devil starts to move in to get him, the Virgin Mary and the heavenly hosts appear from heaven, singing, "Those whose seeking never ceases, are ours for their redeeming." Morton Kelsey points out that it's a bit like what 1 Timothy 6:12 says, "Fight the good fight of the faith and take hold of eternal life." There are many ups and downs. What matters is that we keep seeking to grow, seeking truth, seeking God.