

<i>Date Preached</i>	23-Aug-2020	<i>Date Initiated</i>	11-Aug-2020
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Yr A, Pr 16 (Tr 2)
<i>Main Text</i>	Mt 16: 13-20		

He said to them, "But who do *you* say that I am?"



I have had occasion to say to some of you—and I may even have said it to the vestry during one of my interviews—that I have a very hard time with questions about 'favorites.' If you really want to stump me sometime, ask me what's my favorite color or flavor of ice cream or movie or tree. Although it's usually fairly easy for me to name what I *don't* like (I'm not partial to yellow, and I don't watch movies with gratuitous violence), for whatever reason, my mind just doesn't naturally pare down whole categories of things to one 'best' or 'most liked' choice. Different choices appeal to me at different times and in different contexts.

As I was interviewing this spring, several committees and vestries asked me to name my favorite passage in the Bible. I grew to have a standard answer, because I knew they wouldn't really be satisfied if I said I didn't have a favorite. I have always been quite drawn to St Paul's letter to the Philippians, so I would respond with this passage from the fourth chapter (4-7):

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

It is an excellent passage, and it truly makes my heart sing every time I hear it. But can I say it's my *favorite* passage from *all* of Scripture? Not really.

For there are so many! In the Old Testament, the binding of Isaac; the washing of Naaman in the river; the prophet Nathan's rebuke of King David; Jacob's wrestling with the Man of God; the calling of Isaiah's in the throne room of the Lord. And in the New Testament, the story of Jesus' presentation in the temple, and Simeon's and Anna's response; the baptism of Our Lord; the Transfiguration—there's a big one for me!; Jesus' washing the disciples' feet at the Last Supper; Paul's assurance, in Romans 8, that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of Christ; the image of Christ as our Great High Priest in Hebrews; and the transformational visions of the new heaven and the new earth at the conclusion of Revelation. These are, for me, some of the most powerful passages in Scripture—passages that somehow cut right to the core of my faith and my being and my hope.

And so, too, the confession of St Peter that is our Gospel lesson this morning: Peter's personal and definitive acknowledgement of Jesus as the Messiah, the one anointed by God as the long-expected Savior; and Jesus' naming Peter as the founder of the Church, the ongoing presence of Jesus' Body on earth following the Ascension. To be sure, there is a lot packed into these seven short verses, and candidly, I had tried to write a sermon that explicated them a bit, theologically.

But, to tell the truth, that sermon just wouldn't settle ... just wouldn't get written in a way I felt was worth preaching. And I took this as the Holy Spirit's telling me that what I really needed to talk with you about this morning is why this particular passage from St Matthew is so important to *me*. I hope you will indulge me.

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My husband Jim and I spent almost two years living in Shanghai, China, several years ago. The company I worked for had sent me there for what was supposed to be a five-year posting, but they ended up calling me back early, to fill a vacancy back in the States. Our time in Asia had been personally stimulating and rewarding, but professionally a big challenge and the cause of many headaches and not a few sleepless nights. We were half-a-world away from family, friends, our church, our routines and traditions ... everything that had helped define our life and fill it with joy and meaning. We were not unhappy in China, but I think we both felt rather bereft: apart from so much we held dear and searching for new things ... in a culture we knew extraordinarily little about and was quite difficult to penetrate. In retrospect, I have come to understand that this apart-ness ... this suppression of the familiar ... this forced turning-from ... actually afforded me a lot of clarity; actually permitted me to hear the invitation Christ had been offering me.

Well, that's not quite accurate: In truth, I had *heard* Christ inviting me aplenty—I had just become expert at concocting reasons for always needing to decline. I first perceived a sense of call to the ordained ministry in high school—I think it was the summer following my freshman year. But I brushed that off as false or illusory, for how could God expect me to commit to a career *then*, before I'd even begun to explore what the world had to offer me? Christ's invitation returned, a bit more muted this time, toward the end of college. But I dodged that, too: I had important things to do, personal goals to accomplish, and ministry just wasn't part of my plan. Then, in my mid-thirties, I twice heard the call of Christ to take up the Cross of ministry—in a positive way—and twice I told Him it wasn't for me. At that time, the wider church was embroiled in debates about same-sex marriage and whether or not to ordain LGBTQ people, and I simply didn't have it in me to fight my way into an institution that wasn't inclined to accept me as I was. Thinking I was being clever, however, I also tried to strike a bargain with God. I filled my life with the work of church: volunteering to help with this, that and the other; sing here, there and everywhere; lead this group and chair that committee—most weeks, I was at the church four or five nights a week, as well as at least half the day on Sunday. That would be enough for God, right? I'd do 'God's thing' ... *my way* ... and, I was confident, we'd both be satisfied.

In fact, my busy-ness satisfied neither one of us. After a few years, I felt increasingly burned out and resentful, as I realized that my sacrificing much of my relatively little free time had merely created become another pile of obligations. And, I noticed, Christ didn't seem to be calling me anymore. The line had gone silent, and it seemed like He had moved on to fields more fertile than me.

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And so, some fourteen or fifteen years later—in fact, exactly six years ago to this *very day*, on the liturgical calendar—I came to be sitting in our apartment in Shanghai, on the very last Sunday we'd spend in China. It was my turn to read the Gospel lesson in the little 'pan-Protestant' ex-pat church we'd been attending, and I opened the Bible to see what Matthew 16:13-20 said. As I read the story of St Peter's confession and practiced the words aloud, I felt the spiritual presence of

Christ like I hadn't felt in over a decade: Our time away from the familiar ... the pounding I'd taken from my crazy job over there ... the crisis of self-confidence I'd experienced unlike anything else before (or since)—all of that and more, I'm sure, had unstopped my ears ... un-called my heart ... and subordinated my will to Christ's. For that Sunday morning, which I practiced *reading* the words of Peter, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God," what I *heard* was Jesus' saying to me, "Are you ready to listen to me now?" And I literally fell on my knees and said yes, I was ... and still am.

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Living fully into Christ—and to Christ's intentions for us—means living less to ourselves. It may mean giving up some of the things we think are essential—that make life worth living. It may mean reconsidering some of our values and rethinking some of our decisions. It may even mean speaking an "*I am*" or an "*I will*" to Christ that we cannot begin to fully comprehend ... because we suddenly know we can no longer *not* speak it.

Whatever living fully into Christ may look like for any one of us, this much is true for *every* one of us: Whenever we give our lives over to Christ, it is only after He has already done the same for us. Whenever we say Yes to Christ, it is only in response to Christ's already-Yes to us. Whenever we finally and fully confess Christ in our lives, we are merely—and yet *radically*—confessing that our lives have been in Christ from the beginning. We simply needed to be invited one more time.



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