

“The Most Important Question You’ll Ever Be Asked”

(Matthew 16:13-18)

For Your Life in Christ the 11th Sunday after Pentecost

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Saint Paul’s Lutheran Church of Irvine, CA (LC-MS)

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Introduction: We face a great challenge in our time:

- A. Alister McGrath in his book *Evangelicalism & the Future of Christianity* explains that the 18th century Enlightenment established human reason as the highest standard for knowledge and truth, but it gave way to the late 20th century into-the-present worldview called postmodernism (182f).
- B. Once upon a time, we thought we had everything figured out through human reason, but two things happened: 1) we discovered human reason isn’t as accurate as we thought (e.g. we thought that Newton’s physics was fairly seamless, then along came Einstein); 2) the reliance on human reason ushered in horrible atrocities like the Stalinist purges and the Nazi extermination camps. We are now no longer so willing to boast in human reason.
- C. So what are the implications of the new view? We can’t really know anything with certainty and what is true and what is real depends on a person’s personal view. Postmodernism is the age of relativism. Welcome to the present!
- D. Interestingly enough, our post-Christian era is looking a lot like the pre-Christian era. During that era (before the establishment and explosion of the Christian Church), Jesus asked this as recorded in today’s Gospel at Matthew 16:13:

Matthew 16:13: “When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’”

- E. Various disciples [“they said”] chimed in to give answer. These are translations of the relativistic answers recorded:
 - 1. Jesus is a great king who has come to threaten Herod’s rule. That is a political figure, but a mere man.
 - 2. A great herald of Messiah who had returned to continue the work of preparing for the true Messiah, but a mere man.
 - 3. A great prophet who is legend who perhaps had risen from death, but a mere man.
- F. What do all of these have in common? Jesus = just or merely a man!
- G. As one theologian put it, ***“They thought well of Him, but not well enough.”***
- H. ***In our sin we too our relativists who limit truth; we think well of Jesus...just well enough to coax our consciences, but in sin we limit who Jesus is...we do not want to answer to Him as Almighty God, we want His Word to be relative. In our sinful hearts, we don’t believe in truth! Just versions of the truth! We don’t think of Him well enough!***
- I. In his book *The Case for the Real Jesus*, Lee Strobel refutes among other things the popular assertion, “People should be free to pick and choose what to believe about Jesus.”
- J. This is exactly what we do, but here’s the problem:

From Strobel: “...truth is true even if no one knows it, admits it, agrees with it, follows it, or even fully grasps it...The problem is that people can have beliefs that are ‘useful,’ maybe temporarily and for certain ends, but they may be completely false (236).”

- K. In today's Gospel, the Word asserts that there is an authoritative viewpoint: God breaks onto the scene and asks ***the single most important question you will ever be asked in your life:***

Matthew 16:15: "He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?'"

Part I: While You Still Live and Breathe, What Do You Say of Jesus?

- A. As for the foolish opinions about Jesus, Jesus didn't even care to discuss.
- B. There is only one answer Christ commends this answer given by St. Peter:

Matthew 16:16: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

- C. Jesus praises THIS answer, because it is THE answer!

Matthew 16:17: "And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.'"

- D. Crucial components of what we've just read are the following:
 - 1. What is that revelation from God? (from vs. 16)
 - a. Jesus IS "the Christ, the Son of the living God."
 - b. Epiphanius the Latin (5th or 6th century): "If Christ is the Son of God, by all means he is also God." (Ancient Christian Commentary, lb, 45)
 - c. The Venerable Bede (c. 672/673-735): "*He calls Him the 'living' God by way of distinction from the false gods which heathendom in its various delusions made to itself to worship, either of dead men, or – greater folly still – of insensate matter.*" (The Lutheran Study Bible, 1616)
 - d. That is, since Jesus the Son of God *is* God, then He is also the Living God which means that ***Jesus is the source of life!*** Sometimes folks get confused about the title "Son of God," but it demonstrates divinity, that Christ is very God of very God.
- E. Do we believe this? When we doubt and we seek answers for our burdens under every rock and yet all the while refuse to worship Jesus Christ and call on His Name. Instead we rely on "flesh and blood" = "[the] mortal state of weakness and fallibility." (Lenski, 623)

Interlude: As I mentioned in yesterday's congregational email, this whole subject matter is made evident whenever what we encounter in life fills us with fear, despair, or desperation. How did you react to the news about the terrible execution of journalist James Foley? The flesh and evil one would blind us with hatred, fear, and recoiling from our world in need of God's light...to forget that Christ our Savior is the Living God. St. Paul fell asleep through a similar execution, but consider Paul's words inspired by the Holy Spirit: Philippians 1:21-23a and Romans 14:7-9. With Christ, St. Paul could face *anything!*

Part II: On the Other Hand: God Must Grant the Revelation to Us!

- A. Jesus teaches that not our will, our learning, our strivings, or our intellect can lead us to the truth of God's revelation!
- B. "The Father revealed Jesus to Peter through Jesus himself, and he endeavors to do this in the case of all men by bringing Jesus into contact with them (Lenski, 624)."
- C. We confess as much in *Luther's Small Catechism*:

"I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel..."

- D. Jesus said clearly:

John 15:16: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide...”

- E. I will never forget a very long dialog I had with a skeptic. He kept resisting the idea of faith. He simply believed he could never manufacture the ability to just believe and admitted that his intellect, doubt, and skepticism just would not allow him to believe. He was SHOCKED when I told him that he was absolutely right! When I shared with him that faith is a GIFT, something that ***must be given to us, you should have seen him! It was as if he had just struck a gold mine...he was stunned and overjoyed...faith did not depend on him. For years he had been downcast. Not anymore!***

Conclusion: It is the Lord who enables to give the answer to the most important question!

Matthew 16:18: “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

- A. In this verse, WHO builds the church? Answer: Christ!
- B. He builds YOU to be a member of this Church of faith “on this rock” = Jesus is the rock.
- C. He gives you Himself, your sure foundation for faith, through the Word and Sacraments. They join you to Jesus!
- D. Through His shed blood for you & His victory over death = Jesus builds YOU. This is the source of truth and of faith!
- E. So who is Jesus? He is “the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” The Living God who leads you to the truth; to life; and to the answer to the most important question you will ever be asked!