

Discipleship in the Lectionary - 08/20/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year A

Sunday, August 27th

Matthew 16:13-20

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A Church built with living stones

The Gospel lection for this week represents a critical pivot point in Jesus' ministry. Standing at a place in which human power structures and human religions converge and at a place of significance for the Jews, Jesus asks His disciples a key question. Peter's divinely revealed response leads to Jesus telling how He will build His Church.

Matthew 16:13-20 Commentary

As context, last week's Gospel lection featured the Canaanite woman in the region of Tyre and Sidon (15:21-28). Jesus had withdrawn to this after being confronted by Pharisees and scribes over His disciples not keeping with the traditions of the elders (15:1-9). After the episode with the Canaanite woman, Jesus encountered more crowds and demonstrated another miraculous feeding. This time it was predominantly Gentiles (15:32-39). As He returned to Jewish territory, the Pharisees and Sadducees came to Him and demanded a sign. He gave them the sign of Jonah. This sign would not convince anyone that He was the Messiah when He was alive but would be a sign that confirmed He was the Messiah after His death and resurrection (16:1-4). Jesus then warns His disciples about the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees (16:5-12). Jesus leaves for the region of Caesarea Philippi, no doubt aware of the toll that the false teaching of the Jewish leaders is having on His ministry.

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

The setting for these events is crucial. The city of Caesarea Philippi was about 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee outside of the reach of Herod Antipas. The population was mostly Gentiles. Here Jesus could focus on His continued discipling without continued interference from Jewish authorities. The area was scattered with numerous temples to Baal. Near the town at the base of the mountain rising upwards to the heavens was a deep cavern that had connections to Pan, the Greek god of nature – the one with the hindquarters and horns of a goat. This cave was also the original source of the Jordan river and thus deeply significant for the Jews. At the entrance of this cave, there stood a white marble temple built by Herod the Great dedicated to Caesar. His son, Philip the tetrarch over this region, changed the name of this town to Caesarea and added his own name.

Barclay points out the dramatic nature of this picture. Here is a homeless, penniless Galilean carpenter with a small band of ordinary people. They are here because the orthodox are plotting to kill Jesus as a dangerous heretic. Here they stand in an area littered with temples to Syrian Gods at a place of Pan worship in the shadow of

the white-marble splendor of a temple dedicated to Caesar-worship at the source of the Jordan river. It is at this specific place that Jesus chooses to ask his disciples who do they think he is.¹

¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

When Jesus asks the question to His disciples about what people were saying about His identity, they had no trouble coming up with numerous reports. Clearly, Herod Antipas was not the only one who thought Jesus was a John the Baptist raised from the dead (14:1-2). Elijah was the greatest of all the prophets and the prophet Malachi associates the return of Elijah as a forerunner of the Messiah: "*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes*" (Malachi 4:5). Similarly, identifying Jesus as Jeremiah also had implications for the coming of the Messiah. The Jews believed Jeremiah had taken the ark and altar of incense out of the temple and hidden them away in a cave on Mount Nebo before the people went into exile and he would return and produce them before the coming of the Messiah. While these titles conveyed great honor upon Jesus, no group was proclaiming Him as the actual Messiah.²

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

Jesus turns this all-important question back to His disciples. The "you" here is emphatic and plural. In Southern parlance, this could be rendered as "*But what about y'all? Who do y'all say that I am?*"

¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

It seems like there may have been an awkward silence here. The disciples were quick to report what others think but only Peter speaks up. Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ (*Christos* – "the Anointed One", the Greek word for the Hebrew *Messiah*). In Matthew's Gospel Peter also includes, "the Son of the living God" (cf. Mark – "*You are the Christ*" [8:29], Luke – "*The Christ of God*" [9:20]).

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."

The disciples had already provided feedback into what good-intended human insight had concluded about the identity of Jesus. Jesus recognizes the work of the Father in Peter. He underscores that Peter's insight must have been revealed to him by God. This seems to be things working out as Jesus had stated in Matthew 11:25 – how such things were hidden by the Father from the wise and revealed only to those who had faith.

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. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." ²⁰ Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

Here Simon the son of Jonah is renamed by Jesus. The Greek words for Peter and rock sound similar. Again, one must remember the surroundings in which this conversation is happening. The temple dedicated to the godhead of Caesar is a massive white-marble structure. Temples to Baal litter the area. Deep in the cavern behind the temple to Caesar is a shrine to the Greek god Pan. Human gods had mighty stone structures. Jesus will build His Church not with stones but on the apostles teaching.

¹ William Barclay, *The New Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 155-158.

² *Ibid.*, 159.

Reflection and Application

The first part of this Gospel lection (vv.13-17) indicates how understanding who Jesus is involves a personal discovery. Secondhand knowledge about what others have thought and wrote about Christ is not enough. The study of Christology as knowledge is not enough. Knowing about Jesus is not the same as *knowing* Jesus. Such a relationship is built on faith and trust, not necessarily on understanding. Ultimately, we are all asked (and must answer) the same question: “You, yes you! Who do you say that I am?”

The second part of this Gospel lection (vv.18-20) has massive implications for our understanding of the Church. While leaving aside the controversy these verses have led to between the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions, among these mighty stone structures dedicated to human gods, Jesus is not seeking to build another temple, great buildings, or an institution. Rather, Jesus is establishing the New Israel – the new people of God. This Church (*Ekklēsia* - body of believers whom God calls out from the world and into His eternal kingdom) is the New Covenant. We are the living stones of the Church:

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. [1 Peter 2:4-5]

Many confuse Church (*Ekklēsia*) with church. The latter is an institution comprising of buildings, organizational structures, and denominations. At the time of writing, much of this institutional component of the church seems to be in decline in the west. Alas, civic institutions change (nobody worships at the temple to Caesar anymore). Philosophies change (according to Plutarch, poor Pan was reported to have died during the reign of Tiberius [14-37 A.D.]). Nothing lasts forever – except the Church built on living stones by Christ the Cornerstone which continues to quietly transform the world from generation to generation. Entry into this Church requires the answer to Jesus’ simple question: *Who do you say that I am?*

