

Who is Christ for Us Today?

Matthew 16:13-20, (21-26)

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What keeps gnawing at me is the question, what is Christianity, or who is Christ actually for us today?

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters from Prison*, 1944

Jesus was up north, in the villages around Caesarea Phillipi. Caesarea Phillipi was located about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee in the foothills of Mt. Hermon. Presently, the ruins of Caesarea Phillipi are near the village of Banyas in what we now call the Golan Heights. Caesarea Phillipi and present day Banyas are located near the headwaters of the Jordan River which emerges from a series of springs at the foot of Mt. Hermon.

Banyas, a modern Arabic name which comes from the ancient word Panias. It was a region named for the Greco-Roman god Pan who was worshiped in the area. When one of Herod the Great's sons, Herod Phillip became king of this northern region, he built a great Roman city named for himself and Caesar, which featured temples built to various pagan gods, especially Pan. It was built on the side of the mountain with alcoves and temples carved into the stone for the various gods. As you walked along the streams of waters coming from the springs, you passed the temples of multiple gods to worship. It was most likely in this area that Jesus is walking with his disciples.

Jesus looks around at all of the pagan statues and temples and says, "Who do

people say that I am?” The disciples answer with the names of various biblical prophets. Then Jesus stops, turns and looks directly at his disciples, “What about you? Who do you say that I am?”

Peter spoke up, “You’re the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed and Chosen One of God.”

Matthew says that Jesus commended Peter and told him that it is upon such faith that the church shall be built. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all agree that Jesus began to explain what being the Messiah meant by telling them of the suffering and death that he was facing. That he was going to die on a cross.

Peter does not like what he’s hearing! He tells Jesus, “No! This must not happen! You’re supposed to win. You’re supposed to triumph!”

Jesus quickly turned, “Satan, shut up and get out of here! Peter you don’t know what you’re talking about! You have no idea of how God works.”

Jesus then motions for the crowd which had gathered around to draw closer, “If any want to become my followers, you must deny yourselves, and take up the cross and follow me. Trying to win and conquer is counter to what I’m about. Serving and giving to others is the Way. If you want to find the real you, you will need to give yourself away. My way is the Way of the Cross, the Way of suffering servanthood.”

So, what do we do with what Jesus says?

Jesus asked, “Who do you say that I am?” while standing in the region dedicated to pagan gods and named for the Roman emperor who was already being worshiped as a god. That was his context.

When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in a Nazi prison, he asked in one of his letters, “Who is Christ for us today?” In 1934, ten years earlier, Bonhoeffer had helped Karl Barth draft what became known as the Barmen Declaration. This was a statement of German pastors who were troubled by the direction of the church in Nazi Germany with its Nazi flags, Nazi salutes in worship, and the belief that God spoke through Adolf Hitler, the German people and the Nazi state, alongside the Bible. The opening statement of the Barmen Declaration said, “Jesus Christ, as he is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God whom we have to hear, and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death.” It went on to say, “We reject the false doctrine that the Church could and should recognize as a source of its proclamation, beyond and besides this one Word of God, yet other events, powers, historic figures and truths as God’s revelation.”

For Bonhoeffer, the context of asking “Who is Christ for us today?” was the Nazis.

What about today? Who do people say that Jesus Christ is? American Christian evangelicalism says that Jesus died on the cross to save me from my sins. In other words, everything about Jesus is focused upon me, the individual self. Jesus is limited to a spiritualized, private Jesus who comes into each individual’s heart and saves each of us so we can get to heaven. When it comes to telling us and showing us how to live and what’s important and what’s not, much of White evangelicalism looks beyond Jesus to White culture and power and their view of America.

On the other hand, the old model for American liberal Christianity has often been to look for the historical Jesus. What did he really say back then? We want to find the kernel of truth underneath the layers of tradition and Bible that obscure the

pure Jesus. The trouble is that the historical Jesus cannot be found. The only Jesus to be found is the one found in the Scripture. And the Jesus found in Scripture is the same Jesus who walks among us today and confronts us and says, “Take up the cross and come, follow me.”

My emphasis is that a lot of American Christianity, nationalistic, conservative, or liberal, tends to marginalize Jesus. We put him in our hearts or in our heads or alongside some other spiritualities. We mix him in among the flags, the nation, the politics, the glitz, sports figures, celebrities, and successful business practices. We try to squeeze him in somewhere our hectic schedules or hope he will give us a more balanced life.

But we don't follow him.

Jesus calls us to follow him and as long as we're focused on making ourselves “great again” we are not following the Living Christ. The Living Christ calls us to follow him among hurting people. The Christ of the New Testament walks among us today and calls us to follow him wherever there is hurt, wherever there is suffering, wherever there is despair.

But if we think we can know this Christ without following him in suffering service, it is what Bonhoeffer called “cheap grace.” Bonhoeffer said, “Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”

On the other hand, Bonhoeffer said, “Costly grace . . . is grace that is costly because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. It is costly because it costs us our life, and it is grace because it gives us our only true life.”

When we hear this, we might agree that this is who Jesus Christ is for us

today, but we also might be thinking like Peter, “My heavens Jesus! Surely not! We’re not going to attract a lot of people to a church that tries to live out your costly grace! We want to be successful – maybe not a big, glitzy church but at least a nice simple one. After all, we have a reconstructed building to pay for. And Jesus, folks don’t come running when you keep telling everyone to bear the cross.”

It is true that people do not choose to bear the cross. It is not a matter of choice. And most American churches are built on the assumption that everyone has a choice, so we spend thousands and millions of dollars on marketing and trying to figure out a sure-fire way to convince people to choose us.

But the part of the church Austin Heights comes from; the Anabaptist or Radical Reformation branch of the church has always had an alternative view. We believed that the church of Jesus Christ is not built upon choice; it is built upon calling, vocation. Jesus calls us to follow him and we respond to that call in and through a particular community of faith. We don’t choose the cross; but we’re called to it.

My old mentor, Will Campbell, used to tell of visiting a snake-handling church up in the mountains of Tennessee some years ago. Will was writing an article on churches like these and he went in and sat down and was doing fine until a couple of men brought in some paper sacks and out of them dumped a whole mess of writhing, hissing, coiling rattlesnakes and copperheads up around the pulpit.

One of the deacons came up to Will said, “Son, don’t you try to lift up any of these serpents unless you’re called. If you’re not called and you try, one of these devils will strike you dead.” Will said, “I sat there and watched those writhing snakes, and I knew, I wasn’t called.”

Those snake-handling churches have it right – well, at least partly right. It’s about calling and not personal choice. It is the call to humble service; not to self-celebration; the call to find ourselves by losing ourselves. Or as Bonhoeffer put it, “It is costly because it costs us our life, and it is grace because it gives us our only true life.”

One of the turning points in the history of Austin Heights Baptist Church was back in 1991, when Bill Weber and some others came up to me on a Sunday morning and showed me a newspaper article about some people in Nacogdoches trying to gather food to feed men who had lost their jobs and families because of being HIV+ and having AIDS. It was a turning point, because we knew that we were being called to the follow Jesus and take up this costly cross. We were called to help these men, controversial or not. I remember clearly the deep and profound sense of “I don’t want to do this, I don’t want to do this, but we’re going to have to do this.” It was not a choice. It was a call.

We are called in the waters of baptism to follow this Jesus and as we follow him in service and sacrifice, we discover who he is.

Ernest Becker, in his 1973 Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death* said that the urge, the yearning to be significant, to be a hero, is the central theme of our culture that makes us hopelessly absorbed with ourselves. In our modern world we envision ourselves heroically making a difference, saving society, saving America, and so on. Becker said that our wanting to be heroes is what gets us into so much trouble – even with the best of intentions. It is what gets our society, our country, our politics, our churches into trouble – we reach beyond ourselves trying to be heroic. We think it is up to us to make sure the good guys win in the end (whoever the “good guys” are).

My fear of the Christian nationalism and the Christian Right is their zeal in trying to “save America.” Much like Peter in our scripture today they want to be successful, straighten out the pagans, turn everyone back to the “true faith,” and hate those they oppose. But every time Christianity follows Peter instead of Jesus, we end up with witch trials, inquisitions, empires, and crusades.

At the same time, it is so easy for Christians like us to become mirror reflections of what we detest or disagree with. We become obsessed with hating the haters, so much so, that we too, become immersed in hatred and fear.

The divided church in America simply reflects the divided American society. A young pastor friend of mine in Oklahoma, Jakob Topper, wrote an article this week about the extraordinary pressure on pastors during these times. He tells about a pastor preaching on race recently, and during the week, a church member came to his office and kicked the door off of its hinges trying to incite the pastor to a fight. Another pastor told of a survey taken within his own congregation, of whether or not the congregation should return to in-person worship. It was almost 50/50 split, with several members writing in the comments section that they would leave if the church (1) didn’t open immediately or (2) attempted to open at all (see “Too Many Pastors are Falling on Their Own Swords,” Baptist News Global, Aug. 18, 2020).

In the midst of deep division and extraordinary hate and fear in the church, and in society, it is easy to respond with guns and a politics that says “We must force things to come out our way. It’s all up to us.”

Yet, Jesus Christ calls us to a different way. We are to give up ourselves and our heroic pretensions and trust God. God is in charge. It’s up to God to make

everything come out right. Our job is simply to serve and give and live by mercy, grace, and love wherever we are. We are to be involved. But our involvement is Christ-like. Our church is to be Christ-like. That's it.

The late Congressman John Lewis got involved in anti-racism and the movement for voting rights because he was called. He had no doubt he was called by the living God to march in Selma in 1965, even at the cost of his life. What Bonhoeffer called "costly grace" is what John Lewis lived. Several times it nearly cost his life, but in it, he found his life.

I think of all of you who are feeding hungry people at HOPE (Helping Other People Eat). You're doing this because you are called. And all of you, living the self-sacrificial life doing healthcare at the hospitals and clinics. You are called by the living God. You schoolteachers and educators – none of you have gone into education because you wanted to get rich. You're there because you are called. What makes it even more difficult is your concern of children being together and spreading COVID-19, is that it endangers all the children.

And while much attention is elsewhere, there are Christians and churches down in the valley, along the wall, sacrificially serving children in isolation before deportation, and trying to help the families that continue to be split and deported.

We live in strange times, very difficult times. The amount of anger and fear out there is unbelievable. But we do not give into the anger and fear, we do not build walls and get our guns. The Living Christ calls us to take up the cross and follow him – and we do not do it, if we're not called to it. But if we're called, then let's go.

C. S. Lewis ends his classic book *Mere Christianity* with these important lines, “The principle runs through all life, top to bottom. Give up yourself and you will find your real self. Lose life and it will be saved. Submit to death – the death of ambitions and secret wishes. Keep nothing back. Nothing in us that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for Christ and you will find him, and with him, everything else thrown in.”

Let it be so with us.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,
Mother of us all. Amen.