Pastor Barry South, CP First Presbyterian Church Grand Bay August 23, 2026

OPENING SENTENCE: To those that are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ: May mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance.

PRAYER of ADORATION: Grace to you and peace from God who is and who was and who is to come and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Christ who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. AMEN.

PRAYER of ILLUMINATION: Blessed Lord, who caused all holy scripture to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN.

Sermon: Who Do You Say That I Am
Scripture: Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Phillippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in Heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.
THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD!

Peter's historic confession of faith at Caesarea Phillipi stands as one of the great Christological affirmations in the Gospels. Matthew presents it almost as a blurt – unanticipated, not overtly foreshadowed in the preceding narrative. People are saying various things about Jesus, trying to understand what is going on in their encounters with him, identifying him with one great prophet or another come back to life. Jesus asks Peter about all of this, then looks at him directly: "But who do you say that I am?" Peter is somehow able to respond, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." In Mark 8:29, it is more curt, "You are the Messiah". Like Mark, Matthew includes Jesus' order to keep the "Messianic secret," charging his disciples to keep quite about what they know.
The Roman Catholic Church stands on this passage. In their understanding, the apostolic authority passed on from generation to generation, beginning with Peter receiving the "Keys of the Kingdom" from Jesus, is what makes the church, **the church**.
Pope Benedict XVI receives his authority from Pope John Paul II who received his authority from those popes before him all the way back to the Apostle Peter. While Protestants may not affirm this interpretation, we can agree that the authority Jesus gives to Peter must also be central to our understanding of our authority as a part of the global church. What, though, is the nature of that authority?
Many of us are nervous when our children are first given keys to drive a vehicle capable of going 100 mph at the age of sixteen. Do they have the maturity to handle such responsibility? We might ask the

same about Jesus' giving Peter the keys of the Kingdom. If we look at Peter's track record prior to and after this event, could we claim that he has the maturity of even a sixteen-year-old? He is constantly missing the point and often talks before he thinks. A few verses later Jesus calls him "Satan" for setting his mind on human instead of divine things (v.23)! Then Peter later denies Jesus three times (Matt. 26:69-75). How does one give the keys to the Kingdom of heaven and build the church upon someone so unstable? Clearly Peter's authority is not based on his rightness or righteousness. Then what is its basis?

This exchange between Jesus and his disciples follows a direct challenge by the Pharisees and Sadducees, who insist upon a sign from Jesus (v.1-4). Not only does Jesus refuse to perform on demand, but he warns the disciples to exercise caution over teachings from the temple leaders. The formation of this new faith community is contextualized in the struggle to understand divine identity and the authority of Christ.

Back at the beginning of this passage, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (v.13). Their response seems to depend on what particular faction they are a part of – whether they are partial to John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or another prophet. In the Protestant church today, people might respond by interpreting Jesus through the lens of Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, John Nelson Darby, Karl Barth, Aimee Semple McPherson, or Billy Graham. The tendency, in other words, is for people to project onto Jesus their particular cultural, theological, and denominational allegiances.

Some said that he was John the Baptist. They felt that John the Baptist was so great a figure that he had come back from the dead.

Others said that he was Elijah. They were saying that he was as great as the greatest of the prophets, and the forerunner of the Messiah.

Then some said that Jesus was Jeremiah. Before the people went into exile, people thought Jeremiah had taken the ark and the alter of incense and hidden it. And that before the coming of the Messiah, he would return and produce them. When the people identified Jesus with Elijah and Jeremiah, they were paying Jesus a great compliment and setting him in a high place.

In the next verse, however, Jesus responds by making the question to his disciples more pointed; "But who do you say that I am?" (V.15).

Simon Peter, as he often does, speaks first and replies, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (v.16). Jesus responds, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (v.17-18).

By the sound of it, Peter got a serious promotion; if there was any doubt about his supremacy among the other disciples, surely this cleared it up! Notice, however, that Jesus was responding not to Peter's particular strengths and accomplishments as a disciple, (which left much to be desired) but to his testimony – "What I have experienced in you, Jesus, is that you are the Messiah, the one that has been sent to us as a gateway into the Kingdom of God."

The temptation of the church has always been to attempt to shore up its authority through external means, the doctrine of apostolic succession being but one example. For centuries the Western Church has attempted to prove the existence of God through natural theology, logic, metaphysics, and, more recently, science.

Furthermore, the authority of ministers has become rooted in seminary education and ordination certified in a particular denominational tradition. Jesus is an unpredictably changeable figure, though, who cannot be boxed in and used in these ways.

It is taken by the Roman Catholic Church to mean that to Peter were given the keys which admit or exclude people from heaven, and that to Peter was given the power to absolve or not absolve people of their sins.

The foundation of the church is not Peter, the original bishop, who passes his regal authority from pope to pope as in the Roman Catholic Church; but neither is it the ability to memorize, assent to, and repackage the "hallowed" confessions of the Protestant Reformation.
The church is not founded on Peter, just as it is not founded on John the Baptist or Elijah, Luther or Calvin. The rock is not Peter, but Peter's testimony. Peter was the first person to recognize Jesus for what he was, and therefore Peter was the first stone in the edifice of the fellowship of those who follow Jesus. And in the days to come, Peter must be the steward who will unlock the doors of the kingdom that Jew and Gentile may come in; and you must be the wise administrator and guide who will solve the problems and direct the work of the infant and growing church.

Therefore, while this passage has been interpreted to give the church empirical power and permanence, the underlying lesson is that the church is as resilient or fragile as each of us in our own faith. The church exists daily in this tension of power and powerlessness. Jesus' question to each of us is, "Who do you say that I am? What is your testimony of me? What is your experience of the living God through my witness and presence?"
This is the rock on which the church is founded and the source of the Christian authority.
This is what grants us the keys of the kingdom of heaven, to bind and to loose on earth. God relates to the church not as a coercive ruler but as a loving parent who entrust to a fragile and immature child the power to do right and to do wrong, to be faithful and to drift away.
The history of Christianity, of course, attest to how vulnerable we are to complacency as Christians, and how easy it is for us to slip into idolatry by resting on and reifying someone else's confession of Christ.

This passage calls us to move beyond our particular political and denominational factions, our various theological emphases, and our respective ethnic loyalties by speaking truthfully to one another in and through our differences about the impact of Jesus Christ in our own lives.
As the apostle Paul understood, it is in our weakness that Christ's strength is made apparent (2Cor. 12:9-10). We become not only individual testifiers within a community, but a community of testifiers to the life-giving gospel of Jesus Christ. By liberating the "priesthood of all believers" in this way, the body of Christ realizes its own authority as living witness that overcomes the power of death and despair.

PRAYER: From the rising of the sun to its setting your name is great among the nations, and in every place, incense is offered in your name, and a pure offering for your name is great among the nations, says the Lord. AMEN

BENEDICTION: Jesus sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah (v.20) during those dangerous days before going to Jerusalem. After Pentecost, proclaiming that gospel became the primary work of his church. GO IN PEACE!