

Read Matthew 16:13-18.

Let's have a quiz. What's in a name? I'm going to call out some names and you tell me what they are known for:

- Christopher Columbus – discovery of western continents
- Jonas Salk – discovered polio vaccine; in two years eradicated the disease by 85-90%
- Babe Ruth – American league baseball player who popularized baseball
- Tiger Woods – multiracial world-famous golfer
- William Wilberforce – After a conversion experience was called to abolition reform and brought an end to slavery
- Martin Luther King – Pivotal leader of the American Civil Rights Movement
- Joan of Arc – the Maid of Orleans was a 15th century national heroine of France. A peasant girl, Joan led the French army to important victories during the Hundred Years' War, claiming divine guidance.
- Florence Nightingale – In response to a call by God, a pioneer of modern nursing. Nursing not reputable; she gave it a whole new meaning. Brought element of “deaconessing” to the profession.
- Golda Meir – Prime Minister of Israel

What's in a name? Names bring to mind the center of a person's life. Why did Jesus ask who the disciples thought he was? Why didn't he just tell them who he was?

This text occupies the center of Matthew's gospel. In fact, it is the central narrative, told in all the gospels. Matthew is structured around five units: Jesus' birth, his baptism, this confession at Caesarea Philippi, the transfiguration, and the cross. Our text today is the turning point in Matthew's story. The disciples come to an understanding of who Jesus is. From this point on Jesus will begin helping them understand what he came to do; that he will be crucified. This confession is also a turning point for us and for all of history, because understanding who Jesus is will make all the difference in our lives. In the end, we will all have to deal with Jesus.

As we know from last week, the disciples left everything to follow this Rabbi, to share in his life. Jesus is about sharing in his life. He invited the disciples to experience him as a person, not as an ideology, to go with him, and he invites us in the same way to participate in his life.

They had been with him for awhile, and now they stopped to spend some time assessing, to have a dialogue. They heard him teach in an extraordinary way, unlike their teachers; they watched him heal, cast out demons, and confront the religious authorities about their hypocrisy. *Who was he?* He had power over health. He could stop the wind and walk on water. He assumed authority over demons. He raised the dead. His words were a direct message from God.

Many of us have walked with Jesus for awhile, coming here to worship, coming to Sunday School, studying the Bible, and singing in the choir. You've experienced Jesus all week by loving these kids in Vacation Bible School. Like the disciples you and I have been sharing in the life of Jesus together.

So let's pretend we are standing with Jesus, not in Caesarea Philippi, but in Duncanville, Texas in 2008. Jesus sits in the service with us, and then getting up Jesus addresses us, asking, "Who do your friends say that I am?" What would you say? Do you know what people are saying? Are you talking about him with others, inside and outside the church? How would you answer Jesus? You might say, "It's not looking too good for you around here. Your reputation is in the tank." Or, "Sorry, Jesus, I don't know. I haven't mentioned your name to anyone outside the church in years." How embarrassing would that be! So in the event that we might be asked that question, it's good to think about how to talk about Jesus to others. One thing that will help is to know your audience.

People my age – baby boomers – are very influenced by modernism and the Enlightenment, so we tend to lean on scientific discovery. That is, when it comes to faith, we typically impose human reason on Jesus. Miracles are doubted because we don't understand how they could happen. We are also very into our own authority. That thinking tends to reduce Jesus to teacher or prophet; someone with good moral values and strong ethical teaching, but hardly a God who is above us in every way.

People in their 20s, however, the Millennials or Generation Y, called The Lost Generation, those who would be considered postmodern, are very information-based and open to exploration of ideas. The mystery of God does not bother them at all. They are not locked down to science because they realize science does not have all the answers. While they are very willing to explore themselves, they don't really want to be told what to think. But the good thing is that they are open to dialogue. They want to discuss open-ended question like *who is Jesus*, as long as you respect their quest for discovery.

But first, before going on to others, here today, the question is, *who do you say that Jesus is?* After walking with him for awhile, you must ask yourself, *who do I think he is?* Is he a good teacher? A moral leader? Someone who is interested in you "living right?" Someone to imitate? That's what the people thought. Jesus to them was John the Baptist, Elijah, or Jeremiah, prophets who were expected to point to God's Messiah. Or is Jesus, to you, like the disciples, the One who embodies the way to salvation; the One with the power to "save and heal you;" the "One sent from God?"

It's a hard question with two very distinct answers. The real question is not "what is Jesus" but "who is Jesus?" It's not about what we believe but whom we believe. It's about a relationship with a person, not a subscription to an idea. It's a question about being in love rather than being right.

Who is Jesus? Is he a teacher? Prophet? Messiah?

Jesus will ask you, "Who do you say that I am?" And then you must make a choice. The kids in Vacation Bible School have been told all week "choose." We certainly have the freedom to respond or not respond. God reveals himself. Then we must take it up. And that's exactly what the disciples did, as Peter spoke for all of them.

You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!

What's in a name? What does that mean that Jesus is the Messiah, Son of the living God? Like all those people earlier whose names said something about them, how does that name identify who Jesus is?

Actually, if you remember, God named Jesus himself. Joseph was told, "You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). God named him to reflect everything God stood for. The name means "Yahweh saves." It means "healing." Jesus is "God's Anointed," the one sent from heaven. The person, Jesus, supercedes life here. Jesus, comes from God and therefore points to life beyond this life. His name says there is more than just this life.

It might be hard to grasp, but it's so simple. Jesus connects us to heaven, to the eternal. That's what his God-given name means. There is more to life than the here and now. That is good news!

Following Jesus is different from following just a man. Many religious people follow an ideological way of life or a particular political persuasion. But the name of Jesus, because it is born from heaven is more than that. Jesus is the living God, and that identity has great implications for our lives.

When you have cancer, you don't really think about theology or ideologies. What you want is a God who changes things. When I had cancer I didn't know if I would survive. Often I could only pray, "Help me Jesus." A friend said to me, "That is enough." What I found was a Savior who said, "No matter what, I am here." God's presence comforted and saved me, and it would have saved me, even if I had died because if I had died, I would live eternally.

So, if you miss the person, if you miss the power in the name of Jesus, and you turn everything in the gospel to rules to be kept, you will have concluded, Jesus is a teacher. You will be religious, but you will not know God. If you want that kind of religion, you can turn to just about any religion. But that's not Christianity.

Why didn't Jesus just tell the disciples the answer? He's not that kind of God. Jesus does not shove himself down your throat. They had to come to faith on their own. Now Generation Y will like that. Jesus gives us the opportunity to discover for ourselves what God has revealed. Do you believe what has been revealed to you? Jesus said to Peter, "Blessed are you. Now I'm going to tell you who you really are. You are rock solid. You have accepted the truth God revealed."

That's what it takes to be a disciple. You have to be rock solid about God's revelation, just as the disciples had to answer Jesus' question in our story.

Let's say you claim the name, as I do. This passage brings wonderful news. Jesus said, "The gates of hell will not prevail against the name of Jesus Christ."

That means when you experience circumstances that are hellacious, you will not be defeated. There is no trouble, no persecution, no bad economy no bankruptcy, either

emotional or financial, no murderous event, no storm or war that will overcome you. There is no situation or horrific loss that will ultimately defeat you.

I am going to tell you a very difficult story. You will hate this story. But we must not shy away from reality in the church because the world is a rough place. A toddler was brought to Children's one evening when I was on call, badly injured by her mother's boyfriend, who had been left to baby-sit her three preschool children. It seems this woman's husband, the father of her children, had an affair. In retaliation, this woman separated from him and shortly thereafter, moved in with her new boyfriend. The crying of this 18-month-old got the best of him that night and he silenced her. There she was, fighting for her life. As chaplain, I helped the mother call her estranged husband to the hospital. You can imagine the ensuing pain and anger as he learned what happened to his daughter. But as we turned our attention to the child and toward the hope of Jesus Christ, Jesus stood with us in that room. We turned to him, and through the gospel, baptized the baby. There together, talking to the Lord, we saw the ultimate hope we have in God, despite the worst of circumstances. Peace and redemption came into that room that night. Hell of no sort shall prevail when Jesus Christ is present.

This is certainly the worst that can happen, and most of us will never be confronted with that kind of tragedy. We will most likely simply experience the day's troubles. When Jesus Christ is present, you can overcome all kinds of difficulties, discouragements, depression, disability, or anything that has come upon you. Life for you can be and will be in the Lord better and richer and more fulfilling because the gates of hell will not prevail against the name of Jesus Christ. Why not? Because God is living, not dead. God brings you life and offers a new song and new hope. He gives his life and his presence to you in any and all circumstances, no matter how hellacious.

We the church are bearers of that message, that good news. Do we bring news of judgment? No! We bring news of life. This is the rock upon which the church is built. Church, have you forgotten this? Have we lost the vision of our message? We have languished mostly because we have taken our eyes off of Jesus and what his name means.

What's in a name? Jesus name embodies everything that God is and God brings to us. Who do you say that he is? Jesus, I mean. Is he the Christ, God's anointed, Son of the living God? Make your choice today.