

The Face of God

Shepherd's Grace Church

August 24, 2014

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷And 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. ¹⁸And 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. ¹⁹I 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." ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah (Matt. 16: 13-20) (Also Read Rom. 12: 1-8)

You shall cross the barren desert, but you shall not die of thirst. You shall wander far in safety, though you do not know the way You shall speak your words in foreign lands, and all will understand, You shall see the face of God and live. Be not afraid, I go before you always, Come follow Me, and I shall give you rest. If you pass through raging waters in the sea, you shall not drown. If you walk amidst the burning flames, you shall not be harmed. If you stand before the pow'r of hell and death is at your side, know that I am with you, through it all Be not afraid, I go before you always, Come follow Me, and I shall give you rest. Blessed are your poor, for the Kingdom shall be theirs. Blest are you that weep and mourn, for one day you shall laugh. And if wicked men insult and hate you, all because of Me, blessed, blessed are you! Be not afraid, I go before you always, Come follow Me, and I shall give you rest!

Have you ever given someone a gift? Adults and parents who give gifts know the joy of giving. We know the meaning of the expression, "it is more blessed to give than to receive!" We know the life-changing energy that comes not only to the recipient but to us as well when we watch someone open a gift that is exactly what they wanted! If we are honest, we probably also know the disappointment in the eyes of a person when we give a gift that is not quite on target.

To give a gift is to take a risk! It is to open yourself up to possible rejection and reaction that is not exactly what you want on the chance that you can hit the jackpot, feel the exhilaration of finding that perfect connection with the person you care so much for that you only and always want to please them! To give a gift is a great responsibility. To give the right gift takes thought, planning, purpose and

passion. I am not talking about the gift you might give to a teacher on the first day of school when you do not know that person. I am talking about the gift you might give to a teacher on the last day of school after the two of you have struggled all year long to acquire knowledge, work hard to understand concepts, laughed and cried, lived and died together to gain understanding. The gift you give at the end is carefully considered and acknowledges that the person you want to share it with has changed your life! You are willing to take a risk because you appreciate the risk that person has taken in the struggle he or she has shared with you!

There is a problem however with giving gifts. When we give, we have to let go. We have to recognize that what we give is no longer ours. Our gift now belongs to the one to whom we give it. We have no control over it. We can make no criticism of how the other person uses it or offer suggestions to that person for its use! We have to surrender all claim to it! Sometimes the person receiving the gift uses it in a way that we might never have intended. The way the person uses the gift is neither right or wrong, it is just different from the way we imagined!

A few years ago, my oldest daughter gave us a corduroy love seat. It was very comfortable and we used it in our front room for awhile. When we got a new couch, we moved the love seat up to the bedroom so we could continue to use it and enjoy it there. Over time, we used it less and less and our big dog Eugh used it more and more until it gradually became his bed at night. One weekend, Erin came for a visit. We were at Rochelle's parents and Erin mentioned how much she was looking forward to sleeping on the corduroy couch. At that point, I had to explain to her that the couch was no longer in our front room but upstairs in our bedroom and that it...er...um...er...had kinda become the dog's furniture.

We had never intended to use the couch in the way we ended up using it but after a time, it more completely suited our purposes in the way we ended up using it! The point is that when a gift is given, it becomes the property of the giver. I am pretty sure Erin was disappointed that we ended up using her gift in the way we did but she did not say anything. The couch was given and it was ours to use as we choose. Giving something means giving control of that thing to someone else!

Today, Paul teaches that we are to give our bodies to God as a "Holy and Living sacrifice." When we hear this teaching we might react with some reservation. What exactly is God going to do with us? How will God use us? Will we like the way we are used? These are all legitimate questions but they are not the right questions for us to ask.

Yesterday, I had the opportunity to officiate at a wedding and there, I invited two people to give their lives to one another. Willingly, they agreed. They pledged to love, honor, and trust one another as long as they both shall live. They did not give themselves readily, they gave themselves willingly! No one is ready to give over control of themselves or their lives to another. We all would like to have control completely of all we are, but I have to ask...how is that working out for you?

When you try to maintain control over your life do you find yourself satisfied? Fulfilled? Accomplished? In truth, is there not more satisfaction, fulfillment, accomplishment in working with others, in enjoying success with others, in building something with others than there ever is in doing that thing alone? Do you not find more joy in seeing the success of something together than in building something by yourself and never having it noticed by others?

One time, there was a preacher who woke up on a Sunday morning and decided he did not want to go to church and preach that day. He wanted to do something by himself. He called the chairman of the elders and told that person he was sick and would not be able to make it to service. After making all the arrangements, the pastor called the pro-shop at his favorite golf course and made a tee time. He stepped to the first tee and Jesus and God were looking down on him. Jesus said, that is just not right. He shouldn't have lied to his elder. He shouldn't be skipping service this morning. God said, "relax, I've got this one!" On the first hole, the preacher made a birdie. That is one shot under par and he was ecstatic. The second hole was a short par 3 and the preacher made his first ever hole in one! On the third hole, the preacher made another birdie and was 4 shots under par after three holes. Jesus said to God, "I thought you said you had this one under control!" God said, "relax! This is the best way to deal with him!" Jesus thought for a minute and then smiled." You're right, He said, "Who's he going to tell!"

We can accomplish great things by ourselves but often they remain just for ourselves and they become less than satisfying. When we can share with others, we can acknowledge what we do and we can also recognize what they do. The question I asked the couple getting married was not, "Are you ready?" The question I asked them was, "Are you willing?" We do not readily give control of our lives to another. No one is ever ready. We do not know what is going to happen next or how that other will use what we have given. We must willingly give control.

In marriage, we do that out of trust. We make our lives a good and perfect and acceptable sacrifice to the other person. We do everything we can to use our life to the betterment of our relationship with

the other person. In life, God is asking that we do the same thing with Him! God wants us to give ourselves, not readily but willingly to the promise God makes to us! God wants us to know that we will be used to the glory of the kingdom and that we will build that kingdom together as a community. God wants us to know that we become that community not by being the same, but by being different.

Just as in marriage, two people come into a relationship with different gifts, so in church we come with different gifts! We do not enter readily into full participation in church. We enter guardedly, like we enter a first date. We want to get to know the one who we are going to spend our time with. Over time, we find a community, people like us who struggle, who stumble, but also people who seek and strive to serve God and one another. We want to become like them, we want them to become like us and we want to serve together; not readily but willingly! Willingly, we become not community any longer but communion! We become the body of Christ! Each of us brings our own gifts, our own abilities and together we use those abilities to create with God, all God needs to build the Kingdom! We may not understand how God uses each of our gifts, but willingly we trust God to use them not to our purposes, but to Gods!

When Jesus comes to the district of Caesarea Philippi this morning, He brings the disciples to a place of incredible contrast. As he begins to ask them questions, behind him is the highest point in all of Israel, Mt. Hermon. With that backdrop, they would have remembered that Moses went up a high mountain and received the commandments from God! They would have recalled the unfaithfulness of the people whom God had led out of slavery and into freedom. They would have perhaps associated that with Jesus' giving of the bread and feeding the people upon whom He had great compassion.

They would also have contrasted that with the extreme oppression the people felt under Roman rule. The very name of the city to which Jesus brought them would have reminded them of the contrast. The town was named for a Roman ruler and was a constant reminder that the people of Israel were in reality slaves to a system that took from them almost all they earned leaving barely enough for them to feed and care for their families. Even knowing how Jesus demonstration of God's abundance fed the people, the reminder of oppression and an inability to experience that abundance would have been dramatic!

In the midst of that dramatic contrast there was another! Caesarea is an extraordinarily beautiful place! Built by Phillip and completed by Herod, there are few places in Israel, even in the entire world more beautiful. As Jesus taught His disciples in Caesarea, He was aware of the extreme beauty, a beauty that

had been created with slave labor and at the cost of great wealth. In the midst of this opulence, in the face of this wealth flaunting its presence while poverty was so pervasive all around it, Jesus begins to question his disciples.

There is one more contrast of which we should be aware as we think about Jesus questions this morning. As the disciples faced Jesus with Mt. Hermon in the background, Jesus was looking down at the incredible pools fed by the Jordan river, the river in which he had been baptized, pools which contained the water of life. High above those pools, carved into the hillside were temples and shrines to other gods. With these temples clearly in sight, Jesus begins to ask, "Who do the people say that the son of man is?"

The disciples answer, "Some say he is John the Baptist!" News of John's death had been made known to the disciples at the beginning of chapter 14 and yet they reported what was said. Jesus wanted to know at this point who the "people" thought the son of man was. Encouraging in the response is the belief by the "people" in God's power to overcome even death. Others say Elijah. Elijah is the one who is to come before Messiah. Elijah is to pave the way. The disciples report this and Jesus still has cause for encouragement. The "people" are thinking in terms of God's active participation in their world. They are not totally deterred by the presence of Rome and the powerful oppression that permeates their lives. Still others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Again, cause for encouragement! The "son of man" is placed in the prophetic tradition! The possibility for God to be at work is acknowledged! The world is waking up!

Jesus recognizes from the responses that the world is not yet ready to receive the fullness of God's blessing given in the "One who became flesh and walks among us," but there is reason for encouragement. Perhaps feeding 5000 men, not to mention the women and children, healing the sick, curing the lame, even raising a few from the dead has served to heighten awareness! The world does not yet know the fullness of God's plan. The world has not yet been made ready to "repent for the Kingdom of heaven has come near!" The world, however is ready to be the field, the world is ready to be cultivated! Jesus now has to wonder, do I have the right seed?

He asks the next question. "Who do you say that I AM?" Just as last week, when Jesus walked on water, we are confronted with the same revelation. Jesus asks the disciples, using the same Greek that is used in John's gospel, "Who is I AM?" Last week you will recall, Jesus said, "Do not be afraid, I AM!" Last

week Jesus revealed himself and the disciples worshiped Him proclaiming, "Truly You are the Son of God!" (Matt. 14) Now Jesus asks, "Who do you say I AM?"

In this moment, a perfect and living sacrifice is made! The church, the disciples are now ready to respond fully. The pastor has not played hookie to get in a golf game. The elders are not trying to divide the church and pull it in the direction of the world. The church, prepared by the lessons they have learned willingly professes its faith! They notice Jesus has shifted the emphasis of his question. No longer interested in the vaguery of the question posed earlier, He now asks the church directly, "Who is I AM?" "Who do you say "I AM?" Willingly the church professes faith!

Just like the newlywed couple, the church cannot be certain of the future they seek together. They step forward in faith, willingly trusting the one who has demonstrated He is worthy of their trust. Boldly they stand before the world, mindful of the place where they make their profession. Painfully aware that such a profession will go against all that the world holds true and right, knowing that pain and suffering will undoubtedly result from their statement, the church professes its faith!

You are the Messiah! You are the "Son of the Living God!" Peter proclaims! You are the One who takes away the sins of the world, the church affirms! You are I Am! From before the beginning you are! From the end we know you will be for in you there is no beginning and there is no end! You are! In you we live and move and have our being! You are! In all that means, we willingly make our profession of faith! We willingly acknowledge all the risk and we gladly give to you our lives. Do not let us be concerned about how you use us, but use us, in this moment, in this life, in the life that is to come to honor and glorify and praise your name! You Are!

And just as Paul reminded the Romans, Just as Christ Is, so are we all. We are many gifts yet we are all one body! We are many parts that make up the whole! Today, Jesus asks us...He asks us as the church and He asks us as individuals...Who do you say that I AM"

Who is Jesus for you? The church can teach who Jesus is for us. I can tell you who Jesus is for me but who is Jesus for you. It is a question we must all wrestle with for, "Each of us must work out our own salvation with fear and trembling." (Phil. 2: 11) Perhaps the most essential question the church can ask each of us is the question Jesus asks each of us this morning. "Who do you say that I AM?"

One of the greatest responsibilities the church has to each of us is to help us answer that question. WE can tell the stories of Jesus. We can sing the songs and we can show the pictures but we cannot answer the question. You see, the church does not have the responsibility of answering the question for you. The church has the responsibility of helping you answer the question. While I can tell you who Jesus is for me, I should never pretend to try to tell you who Jesus is for you! Jesus must be relationship for you! He must be personal to you! He must be the one you trust, the one you turn to in times of joy and in times of sorrow! Jesus, the Jesus of all of us is really the Jesus of each of us and He wants to give to each of us that personal relationship that comes from knowing Him!

The exciting part of that is that we can only know that intimate personal relationship with Jesus as we know the intimate personal relationships of others. We cannot discover who Jesus is for us by ourselves! We need one another to discover the fullness of Jesus. He is after all Emmanuel! "God with Us!" (Matt. 1.21) He is not God with you or God with me and while He is different for each of us that difference can only be discovered in the midst of all of us!

I often hear people tell me they can worship just as effectively in an open pasture on a Sunday morning as they can in church and I ask you this morning, especially those of you who drove by open pastures this morning...how many of you saw people out there by themselves worshiping? In the 15 years I have been in professional ministry, I have yet to find one person who told me they could worship in a field on Sunday morning, actually go to the field on Sunday morning. People who choose not to come to church should accept their choice. They should not pretend like our pastor, golfer friend! They should simply acknowledge that they made a different choice!

The choice to come, the choice to participate is not predicated on clean clothes. It is not predicated on babysitters. It is not predicated on when service will start or when it will end. The choice to come is predicated on the willingness to come and discover together who Jesus is for you! Until that is a burning question in your life, church will never, can never be a choice for you! Until you understand that choice, it will be difficult for you to willingly enter into other commitments in your life! The church is not of this world. It is in the world to demonstrate another way for the world to work, a way given by God who sent His son...we call him Jesus!

And Jesus said, "Blessed are you, Simon Son of Jonah!" The world has not revealed this to you but My Father in heaven has made this known!" God has given you the answer you are seeking. When God

asked you answered! You professed your faith, not readily but willingly! You professed your faith because you have come to believe! You professed your faith because you have searched your heart and there you found your Jesus! There you found your Messiah, the savior of the world and there you saw the face of God and lived!

Be not afraid! I go before you always, come follow me and I will give you rest! I will give you rest in your profession of faith. I will give you rest in your willingness to follow! I will give you rest in your lives together! I will give you rest in the love you have for one another! I will give you rest! I will give you rest in life! I will walk with you through your trials and troubles. I will not shield you from them but I will protect you and provide for you in all of them! I will give you confidence and courage, strength and peace! I will give you rest! Because you believe, so also will you know the fullness of who I am! Be not afraid!

Do be patient however! There is still much I have to teach you. For this reason, Jesus commanded them not to tell anyone He was the Messiah. He knew with them, just as He knows with us that we, each of us, have expectations as to who Messiah is. Each of us wants to have Jesus be the Jesus we want for the world. What we have yet to learn is that Jesus is who Jesus is for the world! He is for each of us a source of comfort and strength in our own time of need and celebration but He is for all of us savior, redeemer and author of life!

We need to know, not only who this Jesus is for us as individuals but who Jesus is for us as church! He is for us the example of love and grace that are offered to a cold and hurting world. He is for us the direction we are to look to as we are tempted to exclude and marginalize others! He is for us the one who encourages us to work together and not separately for the coming of the Kingdom of God! He is for us the way, the truth, the life which has come into the world not to judge the world but so that the world might be redeemed through Him! (John 3.17!)

We need to know not the Jesus we want but the Jesus we all need, and it is this *Face of God* we need to see! It is this face of God to whom we can look for life, for love, for hope! It is into this face of God we look this morning and through this face of God we are not afraid! Amen!

As an example of this fear, this morning as part of the message, I took the ALS Ice Bucket challenge! I walked from the sanctuary to the outside where there were two eager young men waiting with an ice

cold bucket of water! After I invited a few others to take the challenge with me, they, without hesitation poured the bucket of cold water on my head! Fear sometimes motivates us to avoid the needs of others because of the possible harm we might experience ourselves. The ALS challenge encourages us to overcome that fear for a greater good. The research this group does is not perfect. It is human. Prayerfully, the money raised will lead to better research techniques and a meaningful cure for those who suffer from this brutal and fatal illness. For those afflicted, Be Not Afraid!