

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
Mark 8:27-30
March 19, 2023

You Are the Christ!

Good morning. You might have noticed from the location of the baptismal font that something special is going to happen this morning. We are blessed to baptize Jethro and Brianna Beck, and their cousin Hudson Taylor who has come all the way from Australia for his special moment. And did you also know that today just also happens to be Jethro's seventh birthday! Happy birthday Jethro!

Our scripture this morning doesn't talk directly about baptism, but it has everything to do with the role that a personal confession of faith plays for person being baptized. That is what I plan to explore today.

Again we are reading from the Gospel of Mark 8:27-30. This story is found in Matthew and Luke, with a similar story in John. It is short, sweet, and to the point. So probably best to just listen for God's Word to us today.

27 Jesus and his disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

28 They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

29 "But what about you?" [Jesus] asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Peter answered, "You are the Messiah."

30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

Baptism is a controversial topic among Christians, particularly when considering the age at which a person should be baptized. Some ask should infants and children be baptized before they reach the age of reason where they could make the decision themselves to be followers of Jesus Christ? Or should they wait until a later age, like adulthood, when they can fully comprehend all of what that means? I hope that by the end of today's sermon, we understand how at least in our Reformed Christian Tradition we answer those questions for ourselves.

In today's story, Jesus and his disciples had just come from Bethsaida where Jesus healed a blind man. They traveled some thirty miles along the Jordan River to Caesarea Philippi which lied at the foothills of Mt Hermon. It was wilderness country. Not largely inhabited. But its history was steeped in pagan worship of the god Pan, the god of fields and herds. Interesting that this was the place where Jesus posed his question regarding his disciples' professions of faith.

“Who do people say I am?” Another way to ask this would be “What are people saying about me?” Or “What do people believe?”

Legit questions. Now in the way Jesus asked, “Who do people say I am?” hidden within that question was a theological claim about his divinity.

I AM was the unspoken, self proclaimed name of God. It was pronounced by God when Moses was called to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses asked, “When I go to say to the Israelites ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name? Then what shall I tell them.’”

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.”¹

So Jesus asked, “Do people believe that I am, I AM...that the God of our fathers and I are one?”

This is a communal question and what a community of faith believes is important.

At the beginning of worship we recited the Apostle’s Creed. A statement containing the core beliefs of our Christian faith. For centuries, this creed has united Christians among denominations, all peoples and cultures, throughout all time. It is the umbrella of what we believe. Now under that umbrella might be particulars structures, such as baptism, that might be defined or practiced differently.

In the Reformed Christian Tradition, of which the Presbyterian Church is part, baptism is considered the entry into the covenant of faith. The entry into the church family. This is why our baptismal fount is symbolically located at the entrance of the sanctuary. We want that to be a reminder to each of us of our entry into the church and into the covenant of God’s grace.

A covenant is an agreement between two parties where promises are made. Like in a marriage between two people.

In baptism, we believe that God makes certain promises to us. And in return, we make certain promises to God.

When I think of the covenantal promises at baptism I think of the song “Signed, Sealed, Delivered, I’m Yours,” by Stevie Wonder.

In baptism, God signs us as his masterpiece creation. Just like when an artist puts her signature at the bottom of her artwork, saying that she created it and owns it. So God puts God’s signature on our hearts. God made us and claims us as a beloved child.

In baptism, God seals us with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Once sealed, it can never be taken away. It is a deposit guaranteeing that what belongs to God will return to God one day.

¹ Exodus 3:13-14

In baptism, God delivers us from the power of death and washes us clean of our sinful.

That's why we use water. And a lot of water too! It's an outer symbol of what takes place inwardly. Now can we actually see the sin being washed away from our hearts? No! We believe it is representational of what God is doing within us.

I am all for full immersion baptisms whether at a river or a lake. It's kind of cool to be baptized like Jesus was in the Jordan River. As we go under the water and come back up, is like dying to our old selves and being resurrected into our new selves.

But what if we lived in the middle of a desert where water was scarce? Or where dangerous crocodiles lived? Sometimes full immersion baptisms aren't practical which is why we use our baptismal fount as we do. It's the symbol that is important.

In just a moment, you will notice that Jethro, Brianna, and Taylor will be accompanied by their parents who will make baptismal promises on their behalf. At this time, we believe that they are just a little young to fully understand what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. So their parents, who have made that decision for themselves, promise to raise their children in such a way that will lead them to make those promises themselves one day.

The Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. describes a baptized member as “a person who has received the Sacrament of Baptism, whether in this congregation or elsewhere, and who has been enrolled as a baptized member by the session **but who has not made a profession of faith** in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Such baptized members receive the pastoral care and instruction of the church, and may participate in the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper.”²

So again, when we baptize children, we do so as starting point of faith or entry into the church. Our hope is always that one day our children will make their own public declaration of faith in Jesus Christ, at which point their baptisms would be complete.

Again The Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. says that this is when a baptized member becomes an active member. “An active member is a person who has made a profession of faith in Christ, has been baptized, has been received into membership of the church, has voluntarily submitted to the government of this church, and participates in the church's work and worship. In addition, active members participate in the governance of the church and may be elected to ordered ministry.”³ Active members can serve in church leadership. Baptized members cannot.

² The Book of Order Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), G-10401 “Baptized Member”

³ G-1.0402 “Active Member”

With a child there is a time lapse between that act of baptism and their profession of faith.

With an adult they are one and the same.

Still one baptism, one Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In our scripture today, this is why Jesus asked his disciples the question, but “Who do you say I am?”

They too had been brought up with the idea that they were born into the covenant of faith, as God’s people. But there is a difference between confessing what “WE” believe as opposed to professing what “I” believe.

Peter said, “You are the Christ.”

The Greek word that Peter used is “Christos.” It means the “Anointed One” or in Hebrew “The Messiah.” It was a term that Jesus seldom used because it was chock full of Jewish political and national ideologies.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Peter says, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” To which Jesus responded, “Peter, only God in heaven could have revealed that to you.” So it seems that even Peter’s profession of faith was supplied by God.

What does that mean for our discipleship?

It means that we are on a journey of faith. A pilgrimage. Through baptism we have willingly given ourselves over to Jesus Christ to be molded into his image over the course of our lifetimes.

It’s a journey where sometimes we feel close to Jesus, and other times we feel more distant. A journey where sometimes we are actively involved in his service or in the life the Church and sometimes we drift away.

Still we are on a journey headed toward God and God’s purposes. And God will be faithful to the promises God made to us, even though we are often inconsistent with holding up our end of the deal. I’m sure some of us today have walked away from the Church at some point. That’s in the past. What’s important is that we are here today.

What doesn’t this mean for our discipleship?

It certainly doesn’t mean that we are perfect! In fact, we are far from it. Yes, we have been sanctified by Christ. But again we are being molded into the image of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior each and every day. But on that journey, we never arrive. We are always arriving.

That is why we must extend to each other and ourselves a lot of grace along the way.

We will get things wrong.

We will hurt each other’s feelings.

We will sin against one another.

We will let each other down.

We will break our end of the covenant with God.

But despite all that, we still believe that God is good. We still believe that God is faithful to his promises. And we still believe that God's love endures forever.⁴

So today when we watch these baptisms take place, may we recall our own baptisms, whether as an adult or as a young child. May we be reminded that God has claimed us, sealed us, and delivered us from grips of sin and death. And may we respond in return "I'm yours" as a way of reconfirming our commitment to being fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Psalm 136:1