“Confession”

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Matthew 16:13-20

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***Matthew 16:13-20***

***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.***

A couple of years ago, a friend and I were discussing the different ways one’s faith can play out in a person’s life. Sometimes it’s what we do, choices we make, what we talk about, etc. One thing that came up was discussion of God in particular. Because we think of God in three persons, we have some choices. I have a few questions for you, and I want you to think about why you answer the way you do. There will be an opportunity to discuss this with a neighbor later.

* How many of you say the word “God?”

 How many of you say the word “God” when you are not in church?

* How many of you say “Holy Spirit?”

How many of you say “Holy Spirit” when you’re not in church?

* How many of you say the word “Jesus?”

How many of you say the word “Jesus” when you’re not in church?

I ask because when my friend and I were talking about this, I admitted that I’m kind of uncomfortable using the word “Jesus!” We shared our thoughts about what we were comfortable with and why and why not, what settings, and also, how we had changed over time and came to different decisions as the years went by.

This story came to mind when I was reading today’s text.

Often this text focuses on Jesus’ question to his disciples, and later specifically to Peter, “Who do people say that I am?” and “Who do you say that I am.” The focus is on Peter’s confession, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Often being the oddball that I am though, I found the most interesting commentary was the one found an additional piece of importance to add. The commentator said that this passage *also* comes down to three things, that I call

Location, location, location.1

Rather than jump right to verse 15, when Jesus asks Simon Peter, “Who do you say that I am?” the commentator reminds us not to skip over the very first words of the text for today: “Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi,…” We often picture Jesus speaking to his disciples in a small village, in the space between small villages “on the way to…” somewhere. Or up on a mountain, or away from the crowds. In this text, it becomes important to know that Jesus and his disciples are in a bustling city. And not just a bustling city.

The name Caesarea of Philippi came from some interesting recent history of the place, and to separate it from another older city farther away that was also called Caesarea.

Around 20 B.C. Augustus had given the town and its surrounding region to King Herod. Herod built up the city, including a temple of white marble that honored the cult of the Caesar. After Herod died in 4 B.C., the region passed to King Philip, who further built up the place and renamed it Caesarea Philippi so as to flatter and honor his patron, Caesar Augustus.

The commentator writes, “It was a place that worshiped Augustus, a place filled with political patronage and a reveling in all things worldly. The very name of the town pointed to the “I’ll scratch your back if you’ll scratch mine” give-and-take of the kingdoms of this world.”

For Jesus to ask his questions and Peter to answer with a confession that Jesus is the Messiah, Son of the Living God, *there in that place* was pretty bold, and pretty risky. The same commentator writes, “There in King Philip’s city dedicated to Augustus, Peter’s saying that Jesus is the Christ was a shot across the Roman political bow.”1 Well done, Peter, especially considering the risk of speaking that truth in that place. Location matters.

Later in the gospels we remember moments right before Jesus was killed, when Peter, three times, claimed that he did not know who Jesus was. The first was when Peter denied Jesus to a servant girl. Just after they had led Jesus away and taken him to the high priest’s house, a fire was built in the courtyard where Peter joined some of the people. The servant girl at the gate asked him if he was one of them, and Peter said no. Then, inside the courtyard, while warming himself at the fire, he was asked again by others if he was one of them and Peter denied it. Third, one of the high priest’s servants recognized Peter as being with Jesus in the olive grove, and Peter denied that also. In this location in the courtyard, right after Jesus was taken away, the risk was too great. Peter could *not* say that he was with Jesus. Location matters.

Often when we read scripture, something about the scene that is set might draw us in and we imagine ourselves somewhere in the scene, perhaps most commonly, although not always, with the hero; the one who got it right. So it’s no surprise that we might ask ourselves, like Jesus does in the text, “Who do you say that I am?”

It’s not a simple question. Like Peter, sometimes it felt like a risk to confess his faith but he spoke anyway; and sometimes he denied the whole thing. Do you confess your faith? When you do talk about God, which language do you prefer? Why is that? When you don’t talk about God, why is *that*? Do you choose to talk about God in a different way depending on circumstances?

Does your answer depend on your location? Are there places in your life where it feels risky to talk about God in any way? My guess is that if you talk about God in particular, you might use God or Holy Spirit or Jesus, depending on the setting or the person or the size of the group, or maybe even just your own habit.

I’m going to invite us to move around and find two or three people to discuss this with, for a time of discovery. Taking a look at the insert in your bulletin, give some thought to which terminology for God you prefer to use, and when. Then say a little something about why you’ve made the determinations that you have. Even though you can probably answer in one sentence, go deeper. Don’t be in a hurry. What other reflections come to mind? Feel free to pose other questions to your group.

I want to give us a full three or four minutes for this. Remember to try to stay engaged, and don’t use this time for recess, or early fellowship time!

I will gather us back together when time is up. Let’s begin.

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I hope you have discovered something about yourself or your neighbor. Let’s now close in prayer…

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| --- | --- | --- |
| God | Holy Spirit | Jesus |
| Why? |  |  |
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1<https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2020-08-17/matthew-1613-20-2/>