

SERMON: Knowing Jesus, Knowing You  
TEXT: Matthew 16:13-20

8-23-2020

I have never and will never put bumper stickers on my car. My dad would rise up from his grave to haunt me if I did. Okay, I might put a cling sticker in the window, but it has to be the kind that removes easily. And I recently saw a diagram of the kind of information criminals can get just from the bumper stickers on your car. From the stick figure families in your window to the honor student at whatever school to the soccer ball or the football with the player's number on it - all these can be hints about where your children can be found and when your home might be empty and vulnerable to theft.

On Facebook the other day, someone had posted a photo of two brownies. One was a corner piece, and the other was cut from the center of the pan. The question at the bottom of the photo asked you to choose: edge piece or center piece? I answered without hesitation: the whole pan!

I am a 9 on the enneagram. ISFJ on the MMPI. A "winter" on the seasonal color analysis, a Scorpio, and a right brained person. When I had two preschool

age children at home, my favorite t-shirt said, “I am woman. I am invincible. I am tired.”

I don't think it's just me. We seem to have a need to identify and define ourselves on a regular basis. Did you or someone you know spend time in their early twenties traveling and trying to *find themselves*? If not, perhaps you waited until your forties to stray from the path, calling it a midlife crisis.

If you can remember the 1970's, you may also remember a book called, “Free to Be You and Me.” It was written by Marlo Thomas and had a connection to the feminist movement. After the book came a record album, then a TV movie, all of which were created to challenge traditional gender roles and to send a message to children - especially girls - that they could do anything.

This passage from Matthew seems to address the identity of Jesus, as he asks a question of his disciples: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” They answer, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Then, as if to see if they've learned anything in their time with him, he asks his closest friends. “But who do *you* say that I am?” Simon Peter

- who tends to be the spokesperson for the group - answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Several years ago I did a sermon series based on a Presbyterian Women’s Bible Study called “Who is Jesus?” It was interesting to learn how the gospels, the letters of Paul, and the book of Hebrews each emphasized a different aspect of Jesus from their own experience, and for the particular audience they were addressing.

For Matthew, writing to a Jewish audience, the Jewish heritage and beliefs of Jesus were emphasized. For Mark, Jesus was the suffering Son of God. Luke portrayed Jesus as the rejected prophet, while John emphasized the divinity of Jesus. Paul’s letters focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus, and in Hebrews he was the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

Of course, there are dozens of names used to refer to Jesus, including some that he used for himself. Son of God, Son of Man, Anointed One, Emmanuel, God with us, Savior, Redeemer, Teacher, Rabbi, Master, Lord, Alpha and Omega, Bread of Life, Bridegroom, Deliverer, Good Shepherd, Great High Priest, Lamb of

God, King of Kings, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, the Gate, the Door, Light of the World, the Way, the Truth, the Life, True Vine, the Resurrection and the Life, Judge, the Word made flesh.

Additionally, many of the beloved hymns of our past have provided some names that you might choose. Friend. Lover of my Soul. Priceless Treasure. Gentle Savior. I'm certain there are more that we could add.

In most sermons we've heard on this passage, the question eventually comes around to us as his disciples today. "Who do you say that Jesus is?" It is a question I encourage you to ponder.

But I am drawn as much to what comes next in the lesson. Jesus responds to Peter, saying, "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."

First, if I were Peter, I'd be thrilled to have finally given an answer that pleased Jesus and elicited a blessing from him! Jesus, though, makes it clear that Peter's confession of Jesus as Messiah is not an achievement, but a gift from God. "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven."

While the church often claims to teach the faith and Christians help one another grow in faith, faith is actually a gift from God. Until the Spirit reveals Jesus to us, until we have our own experience of the presence and power of Christ in our lives, then faith is just someone else's story. It is not faith until we can call it our own. It is not faith until we each can answer that question for ourselves: "Who do you say that I am?"

Then, because Peter has expressed his trust in Jesus as Messiah, Jesus gives him a new name and a new identity and a new purpose. "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church."

One commentary was careful to note that the new name is not just a label, but indicates a change in identity and nature. (The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII, Matthew,

Mark, p. 347) Simon, now Peter has been transformed and has been commissioned to continue Jesus' ministry, including the authority to make decisions in his name.

As we learn about Jesus and experience him in our lives, we learn more about who we are. As we answer his question, "Who do you say that I am?," we find our identity in him. We discover our true selves; we discover our God-given purpose.

John Calvin, the Father of Presbyterianism, believed that we can't know God without knowing ourselves, and we can't know ourselves without knowing God. Knowledge of God and knowledge of self are two sides of a coin.

One of my favorite stories is of a child who is busy drawing a picture, waiting for her Sunday School class to begin. The teacher notices how intent the girl is on her work and asks, "What are you drawing?" "Oh, I'm drawing a picture of God," she answers. The teacher foolishly retorts, "Well, no one knows what God looks like, Dear." Undaunted, the child replies, "They will when I'm finished!"

KNOWING JESUS is KNOWING YOU. Often in times of great loss or major transitions in our lives, we may find ourselves wondering who we really are, wanting to claim our identity, or needing to reinvent ourselves for a new phase of life. At these times it might be best to go back to the One who created you, the Source of your being. To define your relationship with your Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. The more we learn about our Source and our Savior, the more we learn about ourselves. Then may we grow into more faithful servants, to the glory of God!

AMEN.