

“WHAT WILL PEOPLE SAY?”

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Scripture: Exodus 1:1-2:10, Mt 16:13-20

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

–Mt. 16:16

“What will people say?” A friend recalls his grandparents, who lived in a small town in southern Indiana. He says that question haunted their every decision and action. He and his siblings were allowed to walk two blocks down the street to buy a Popsicle but, he says, “grandma would inspect us before we went to make sure we were presentable, in case someone saw us and identified us as her grandchildren.”

Many parents of my generation gave us mixed messages. First was, “Be yourself. Don’t worry about what your friends are doing. If your friends jump off a cliff, would you jump too?” And the counter message was, “What will people say?” This led to the famous warnings not to wear old holey underwear, in case you might have to go to the hospital, or the more dire warnings not to get caught drinking or smoking or stealing or – the biggie – don’t get pregnant!! It sometimes seemed to us that how these things reflected on our parents was perhaps more important than the actual effects of the behaviors they tried to warn us about.

Parents and grandparents aren’t the only ones concerned about reputation, or “what people are saying”. Last week’s news was dominated by the results and the reactions to the Iowa Straw Poll. And on just about every news show, we’re asked to be a focus group of sorts . . . a question is posed, and we are asked to respond by email or by phoning in to the “approve” or “disapprove” phone number. Of course, this media question uses an uncontrolled sample, and the results are unscientific, based upon those who actually watch the show and are motivated enough to answer. Perhaps this is part of the polarizing of our society . . . certainly such polls rely upon our gut reactions and don’t allow for much room in the middle.

Politicians also seek public response in more carefully shaped focus groups. The feedback they get helps them hone their message, refine their policy statements, and attract the voters they are targeting.

The published results of the Iowa Straw Poll, the media Q & A, or the focus group not only reflect opinion, but shape it. They help shape the identity of our political candidates — they want to be what you want to vote for.

Jesus first takes a straw poll and asks the disciples, “what are people saying about me?” The answers show that most folk aren’t getting it. People understand that Jesus is special, but they group him with a bunch of dead prophets, from Jeremiah to John the Baptist.

And then Jesus puts the disciples on the spot . . . “Who do you say that I am?” – you who travel with me daily, who have heard my teachings, and have witnessed healing miracles – you whom I am preparing for ministry “Who do you say that I am?”

And for once, Peter – the Rock – the stubborn one, the hot-headed one – Peter gets it right! You are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the Living God!

The LIVING God, not the inanimate idols of the secular temples, nor just the God of deceased prophets . . . but the living Son of the living God. Dynamic and powerful, the Anointed One – “Messiah” in Hebrew and

“Christ” in Greek.

Jesus isn't asking for feedback in order to shape his identity, to change his policies, to be more likable – a better candidate to gain votes. Jesus is confident in his identity. The question is, have the disciples figured it out yet? And Peter gives the right answer.

And yet, the disciples still don't have the whole story. They haven't witnessed the events in Jerusalem – the trial, the crucifixion, the post-resurrection Jesus. And so, perhaps, that is why he affirms Peter's answer, but ends this conversation with “but don't tell anyone!” That answer has puzzled many over the centuries. In Mark, it's known as the Messianic Secret. And it may just be that the disciples aren't yet ready to proclaim Jesus as Messiah because they are still captive to pre-conceived notions of the Messiah as a military warrior-king. They don't yet understand the sacrificial nature of Jesus, the Suffering Servant Messiah.

So let's bring that question forward to today. Peter's answer is no surprise to us. After all, the Gospel of Matthew began with the statement, "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah." And we have the other Gospels and 2000 years' commentary and testimony as part of our understanding of Jesus.

But what do we do with it? What are people saying about us? Do we care? Should we care? And, more importantly, what are they saying about the Jesus they see in us?

Yesterday I attended the funeral of an elder from the Belmar Presbyterian Church. She had been a teacher, she chaired the committee that called their current pastor, and she served on the presbytery's mission council. So it was a packed sanctuary. And you can imagine the parking situation. Like us, the Belmar church has no parking lot – and this was a sunny summer Saturday, just blocks from the beach. Well, I thought I was smart, and started a block south of the church, on E Street which is a one-way street. I figured most folk would begin at the church and then be channeled north on E Street, and I might find a spot south of the church. None. But I did see a small undeveloped lot between two houses, with a temporary sign in front: “Presbyterian Church Parking”, with the deceased's name in parentheses below. It looked full, so I continued on. And I circled several blocks before I came back and decided I would make room in that lot for my little car. And I did. Successfully and without blocking anyone. In fact, another car came in behind me.

I tell you this because on my way back, the man sitting on the porch of the house next to the lot asked me, “How was the funeral?” And I didn't have to think at all. I replied, “It was good. It was the best!” And it was. Carol was indeed one of the saints of the Church . . . you and I are also saints of the Church, in Protestant jargon, as Paul wrote to congregations as living “saints”.

The service was centered on music. Carol had directed the bell choir, and they played . . . with her daughter conducting, and two other daughters playing. I don't need to tell you, there was not a dry eye among them - nor many in the congregation. Carol's brother and the church organist each played a piano piece, and the tiny choir – that she had sung with – sang stoically.

Scripture was read, prayers were said, tears were shed, and there was laughter too. Afterward, according to her wishes, we all had a fabulous buffet lunch, during which people were encouraged to tell stories at the microphone:

- Carol was my bell choir director — I'm so grateful I got to know her.
- Carol and her husband were our friends since college — I'm so grateful I got to know her.

- Carol hosted me – and my sister after me – as exchange students — I’m so grateful I got to know her.
- Carol served on Presbyterian Women with me — I’m so grateful I got to know her.

The repeated gratitude for her life, and the living, dynamic joy expressed were unique in my experience of funerals. That phrase, “I’m so grateful I got to know her,” was repeated so many times . . . it almost felt like a script, but it was said so sincerely and un-self-consciously.

But it was topped by at least two people who added another dimension. One said, I’m not too clear on “grace,” but when I think of “grace”, I think of Carol. Whenever I seek to be grace-ful, I will think of her and try to emulate her. And another said they wanted to be just like Carol.

Now in some circumstances, this might seem like idolatry, or vain praise. But Carol was a very humble human being, and the stories told were of her efforts to be hospitable and caring to others in every imaginable circumstance. The brief biographical notes surprised many of us – we didn’t know she and her husband had Ph.Ds. We didn’t know she and her husband hosted exchange students year after year. We didn’t know she taught pre-school, high school, and college. We didn’t know how she made stockings for every guest at Christmas. We just didn’t know all about Carol.

But the observation that brought the picture of Carol into focus was that she modeled herself after Jesus, the Lord she loved and served, and that her life reflected the love of God described over and over in scripture.

And I was humbled on my way home, as I yelled at a tail-gating driver. I realize I don’t reflect the love of Jesus Christ in every aspect of my life.

I’m not saying that Carol did either. But hearing the testimony toward the times that she did made me reconsider my own attitude.

Who am I? Who are we? Are we reflections of the love of God? To the driver who saw the “clergy” sticker on the back of my car, was I?

You and I are children of God. We are not perfect. We know the words, as Peter did. We even have the Gospel accounts so we have heard how the story turned out. We have every advantage of example and teaching. But we are not – and we will not be – perfect, at least in this lifetime. But God loves us. The Living God. And the more we can take that in . . . the more we understand Jesus as the Suffering servant Messiah, the Son of the Living God . . . the better we can reflect that love out into the world.

What will people say?

The title of this sermon and the grandparent story come from Dean Feldmeyer’s sermon notes on Matthew 16: 13-20, in the online sermon help, *The Immediate Word*, for August 21, 2011.

Exegetical material that informed this sermon come from Dick Donovan’s exegesis of Matthew 16:13-20 in the online sermon resource, *SermonWriter* for August 21, 2011.