

Sermon – Matthew 16:13-20; Romans 12:1-8

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12 Pentecost – Year A

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“We Are Because Christ Is”

Sisters and brothers, friends in Christ, grace be unto you and peace this day, in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The new school year is right around the corner and it will be unlike any other. Uncertainty abounds, and anxiety follows. Beyond the concerns for health and wellness, and the procedures and precautions put into place to safeguard health and wellness, there's another concern. How will relationships be built and nurtured this year? For those learning remotely, how does one build a new teacher-student relationship over Zoom? For those learning in-person, how do teachers and students get to know one another while wearing masks and keeping constantly six feet apart? The good news is that we will all figure it out. I am grateful for our faculty here at Grace, who are more than up to the challenge and who will provide a great experience for the students come what may. The 125th school year at Grace will be another great one. We pray with hope for teachers and students everywhere. Nevertheless, it's all weird. We depend upon our senses to learn about one another, and we rely on proximity to do so.
2. If we struggle to build relationships and understand one another fully, imagine how daunted Peter and the other disciples must have been when Jesus asked them that foundational question, “But who do you say that I am?” They've heard Jesus teach, seen him work wonders. But the only conclusions to which these sensory experiences lead are the answers already mentioned: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets. Yes, Jesus has

shown enough to place himself as one among many of God's servants. But his identity is so beyond our epistemic capacity, his hiddenness under the opposite so complete, that the disciples will never find the answer on their own. In a world where we value our own ability so highly, where we build identity through accomplishment, Jesus simply flummoxes us. Peter gets it right: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." But he makes his confession not by flesh and blood, nor through sight or sound. Jesus' Father reveals this to Peter, and Peter simply receives it and believes it. Oh, as we'll hear next week, he'll push back against this in a few moments, with all this talk of suffering and death; believing God's anointed One is going to die is a hiddenness too far, but for now he simply accepts God's revelation at face value.

3. Remarkably, Jesus does not simply affirm Peter's confession, for Peter has not only come to understand who Jesus is; Peter has finally gotten to the place where he can receive and believe the truth about himself. In Eugene Peterson's delightful hands, this passage has Jesus saying, "My Father in heaven, God himself, let you in on this secret of who I really am. And now I'm going to tell you who you are, really are." While we spend so much time trying to figure out one another, so much effort trying to discover and define ourselves, we only become who we are when Christ encounters us, makes us his own. Simon, son of Jonah, becomes Peter, the Rock. And so do we. Like metamorphic rocks, we are shaped by forces outside ourselves, remade through the pressure released from the empty tomb and the Spirit's blazing fire. This word echoes Isaiah, who called to the exiles to remember with hope the rock from which they were hewn, the covenant from which they were cut. With Peter, we are carved into new life through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. With Paul, we are no longer conformed to this world and its demand to self-create, self-justify. We are transformed, given new minds that can for the first time see, know, and do what is acceptable to God.

4. Who is Jesus? He is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, in whose death and resurrection we become who we are. And who are we? For Jesus' sake and by his call, we are forgiven sinners, resurrected saints. But if we now know who we are, it makes sense to ask *why* we are. For what purpose has God joined us to the saving life of Jesus? For this: to witness to the life that triumphs over death, joins people together, and sets people free. As children of God standing upon the rock, the gates of Hades, death itself, cannot harm us. With the gift of life come the keys of the Kingdom, the power to bind and to loose.

5. I still recall the beautiful autumn day in 1991 when I passed my driving test and received my license. My parents gave me the keys to the family's old 1983 Chevrolet Chevette. The world seemed suddenly wide open; I was free. I could go anywhere, do anything! Of course, I could only go as far as my gas money would get me, and my parents would soon make clear to me that there were boundaries. But still, I could hop into that car and *go!* That's freedom. And that's the freedom Christ gives us with these keys. We are set free for the sake of freedom, to proclaim God's unbridled forgiveness and to work to set others free. Freed from sin's power, the Holy Spirit can work through us to build a world beyond sin's control. To work for a world that is built upon the solid foundation of Christ, a world that more closely mirrors the Kingdom that will one day come. To forgive sin is not simply to dismiss it but to undo it, in whatever form it is found, so that the oppressed might finally go free. Mark Allan Powell writes, "the church has the authority to declare God's will not because it exhibits more insight or greater faithfulness to God than others but because Jesus Christ, God's Son, has chosen to be present in the church and to exercise his authority on earth through this community."

6. Christ is working through us, has given us the keys to freedom. I think he does so not with the apprehension of a parent giving keys to a sixteen-year old, but with the hope that we will grab hold of this freedom with the

unrestrained gusto of that sixteen-year old. That we'll hop behind the wheel of the church and drive it for all it's worth. Binding people together in faith, setting them free from sin and death, and doing it all by pointing to Christ, this One whom we cannot apprehend on our own, this One now revealed to us as God's Chosen, God's Son, God.

7. We, like Peter, are rocks transformed for Christ's purposes. As Paul makes clear, we have each been given gifts for these purposes: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading, compassion, all flowing from God's abundant grace. We are called to use these gifts as public answers to the questions of who and why. Who is Jesus, who are we, and why does it matter? Jesus, God's Son, has died and been raised. We are those who have been crucified and raised with him. We are called now to unlock the doors of forgiveness and life. These are not arbitrary theological musings; they are, rather, claims upon our lives. If Jesus is not one among many, but the One whose life is given for the many, then his identity is determinative. The preacher Audrey West asks, "In what or whom will the followers of Jesus place their trust? Will it be in the privileges deriving from access to opportunity and wealth? In the worship of a prevailing culture's latest idols? In allegiance to the dominant power of earthly rulers? Or will they trust, instead, in the One whose life, death, and resurrection reveal the mercy and justice of the living God?" Friends, the correct answers to these questions come not from the voices of this world that would draw us from God; they emerge neither through our senses nor from our understanding; they are revealed to us by Jesus' Father, gifted by God's grace. Again today, this truth is spoken: You are a child of God, a rock remade in baptismal water, a life set free from sin and death. Will you now live in this reality? Who do you say that Jesus is? May God's grace let your life answer these questions by witnessing to Jesus, for he is the One to whom your life belongs. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.