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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

**Weekend of Sunday, August 23, 2020**  
**12<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 21/Proper 16/Year A**  
**First Reading: Isaiah 51:1-6**  
**Second Reading: Romans 12:1-8**  
**Gospel Reading: Matthew 16:13-20**  
**Sermon Title: “Who Is Jesus To You?”**

## **Theme**

*At a climactic point in Jesus’ ministry, God reveals to Peter that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” and Jesus responds with the promise of a church that will overcome the very gates of Hades.*

## **Text**

<sup>13</sup>Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” <sup>14</sup>And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” <sup>15</sup>He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” <sup>16</sup>Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” <sup>17</sup>And 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. <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>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.” <sup>20</sup>Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

## Sermon

At the heart of today's Gospel Reading is the clear articulation of who Jesus is. In many ways, I answer the question every day, and in every moment of my day.

Some of you have noticed that I wear monogrammed shirts to work every day. The monogram is Zion's logo. In the summer I have short-sleeved polo shirts in gray, white and black because I only wear pants that are gray and black and variations thereof. In the cooler seasons, I wear monogrammed long-sleeved dress shirts that are white, light blue, and white and light blue pin-striped that I wear with the same pants. The reason I wear this limited wardrobe is that I don't care much about being stylish and so I make dressing in the morning easy for myself.

But there is an unforeseen consequence when I wear those shirts, and that is because it is an ever-present subtle witness. That logo occasionally initiates a conversation on what Zion is and what I do at Zion, and once they find out I am the church's pastor the conversation sometimes goes to issues of a spiritual nature. I've had people ask me to pray for them, and so right then and there, I have put my hand on their shoulder and closed my eyes and prayed – that has freaked some people out. But I hope don't need the shirt to tell people who I am and what I am about, as I said, that was an unforeseen consequence.

I think of myself as a nice guy and so my usually kind behavior is natural. But I admit I am not sweet like Barb Thomae, for example. Whether I am in my home or at the church or out in public, no matter how I am dressed or what I am doing I try to behave in a manner that would please God. Not because I fear that if I mess up I'll get hit with a lightning bolt – obviously that hasn't happened, but simply because I want to please God with godly living.

I started this sermon by saying, "at the heart of today's Gospel Reading is the clear articulation of who Jesus is. In many ways, I answer the question every day, and in every moment of my day." I want you to begin thinking about how you articulate who Jesus is to you during your days.

But my behavior hardly ever elicits an opportunity to tell someone who Jesus is. That requires me to be more intentional.

I thought about my job as a preacher and wondered how I, who used to be a flaming introvert, ever got into this vocation. I am not *enochlophobic*, but I was just not comfortable being around strangers or people I didn't know very well.

Oh, *enochlophobia* is the fear of crowds. Impressed? Don't be, I didn't know that, I had to look it up. Did you know there are several websites dedicated to phobias, the fears that people have?

You are familiar with *claustrophobia* – the fear of confined spaces; and acrophobia: the fear of heights.

But did you know that there is such a thing as *pteronophobia* – the fear of being ticked by feathers? Really? Who's afraid of being tickled by a feather?

Anyone want to guess what is at the top of the list of fears, which phobia is most common? It is *glossophobia*. Does anyone know what that is? The fear of public speaking.

Apparently, there are a lot of people who fear what I do as my vocation weekly. Those people would rather be pushed out of an airplane with a parachute strapped to their back; go to the edge of the cliff and curl their toes over the side; allow spiders to crawl on their face; anything else to avoid standing up in front of a group of people and giving a speech. Jerry Seinfeld once said that people would rather be in the coffin than stand up in front of others to deliver a eulogy.

Maybe it's because I am a preacher and I speak in front of people as my vocation regularly, but I am always surprised when, in the church, someone says that they are glad to do anything that the church asks, anything except speaking in public.

Does anyone want to guess what homilophobia is? The fear of sermons. Hierophobia – the fear of priests and pastors and sacred objects. Papaphobia – the fear of the pope. I trust that none of you have homilophobia or hierophobia. But that could be the issue with our inactive members! Hmm!

I have observed, in this matter of public speaking, that even people who have no fear of giving a speech - have never had any problem with standing up in front of the class and reciting a poem, maybe even people who majored in drama in college,

people for whom speaking is no problem - have a problem speaking in church.  
Why is that?

It is not just a matter of standing up and reading something that bothers people in the church. As you know, we have laypersons serve as lectors or readers and they read the scripture on Sunday. Members of the congregation seem to enjoy doing that ministry. We don't have much trouble getting people to read the scripture on Sunday morning.

But if I were to say to those same people, "Now next Sunday we want you to stand up and give about a five-minute talk in church on a topic of your own choice spoken from the heart," do you know how many people would want to do that? Not many, I would guess. Why is that?

About two-thirds of the way through Matthew's gospel, Jesus and his Disciples were traveling in the district of Caesarea Philippi, when Jesus turned to his Disciples and asked, "Who do people say that I am?" "You rub elbows with people. You get out and about, who do people say that I am?"

Immediately they all start shouting out answers. "Some say that you are John the Baptist." Another reports, "A lot of people say that you might be one of the prophets come back from the dead." And on and on come the answers. They are like children in a classroom when the teacher asks something that all the children know the answer to. They all burst out their answers.

We are in a political season and the Democrats gathered virtually for their National Convention last Monday through Thursday to hammer out their platform. The Republicans gather next week to do the same thing. Polls are often used to see how an idea sets with the average American.

Back to Jesus' question to the Disciples that sounded like a poll of average Jews, Jesus' next question wasn't anything easy like the first one. Jesus went deeper on the Disciples when he asked, "Who do you say that I am?"

The hands went down, and their faces searched the ground, their feet fiddled in the sand. "Speak up now; I don't care what nine out of ten average Jews think. I want to hear what you think about me."

That's a whole different question, isn't it? When the questions, the large, sometimes unanswerable questions stop being theoretical and become ours to answer, well that's different. When it gets personal we begin to squirm. Here, we're not talking about a poll of those people, we're talking about our own personal opinions. And that is different.

Though I am recording this video in an empty Sanctuary, there will be modest crowds this pandemic weekend. We won't be able to sing or pass the peace, but we will worship. But let's say, next week, someone asks you, "You go to church, don't you? Tell me, who is this Jesus you worship. What do *you* believe?" This is an increasingly possible conversation you know. Our society is becoming increasingly more and more irreligious. We cannot take it for granted that people know who Jesus is or what we do inside this building. What would you say? How would you answer? Who is Jesus to you?

In the church, we preachers ought to occasionally turn to you and ask, "But what do you believe?" Do you remember many years ago I held an experiment for a month where I did not preach from the pulpit but strolled the center aisle in an attempt to engage the congregation in conversation – during church! I know crazy, right? You didn't like it at all. "We don't talk in church, you do, and from up there." I heard it said.

So I won't ask you to shout it out right now, but ponder this: On what are you willing to bet your life? What are you committed to, from where do you get your set of values, whose philosophy will determine how you live and move and have your being?

You may have noticed lately that there are many social bear traps out here among us. I've stepped in a few: mask or no mask, stand for the National Anthem or kneel, risk a conversation about racism and use the phrase "Black Lives Matter," Trump or Biden. Any of these issues can lead to a strain on relationships, I know this first hand.

I have a personal fail story to tell you. Several years ago, a very good friend of mine asked me to preside at the wedding of his daughter. I knew this friend was and remains unchurched, and raised his children without the benefit of a life of faith lived out through the church, but I agreed to do the wedding anyway out of respect

for my friend. We pastors see weddings as opportunities to preach the gospel and as I saw it, this was a field prepared for sewing good seed.

I met with the bride and groom and their parents and told them how the wedding would go and gave them the usual options to choose from; the scripture readings, the vows, how they would like to be introduced after the wedding when they interrupted me and told me that they weren't very *religious*, and then asked if I could "please not use any of that *religious* stuff." I am sure I had a confused look on my face. I was stunned at that moment and didn't know what to say. Today I would say that I think they would be more comfortable if they got a justice of the peace to perform their civil wedding. But since my friend had asked me and I had agreed to do it, I agreed to their demands and had to google how to do a civil wedding. I mean, I didn't even know what words to say, because all the expressions I am used to saying are based on the Christian faith.

I won't do anything like that again. I am a pastor of the Christian church. It is who I am and what I do and all I know. And when it comes to marriage,

- I believe that God is the giver of this gift we call love.
- I believe that God is the giver of this gift we call Jesus.
- I believe that Jesus freely gives us the gift of abundant life through his teachings on godly living.
- I believe that through his suffering-death and his life-giving resurrection the door to eternal life that was closed by human sin is opened to all who call him Lord.
- And I believe that one day I will see him face-to-face, and I expect that I will be wide-eyed and speechless - yes, me speechless - over the glory that I will behold at seeing the face of my Jesus.

Ask me to speak of anything else and it would be a waste of my time and yours.

While navigating life with all its bear traps, we get opportunities to reconsider just who Jesus is. And if we are bold enough to, we ought to speak up about him. And we ought to have something important to say because there is nothing of greater importance in the believer's life than their confession of who Jesus is to them – the answer to Jesus' very personal question, "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter, the disciple, had many embarrassing moments recorded in scripture. I wonder if he ever tried to get the other gospels to leave them out. No matter though. In today's reading, he got it right. It was his time to speak up and he nailed it. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Several minutes ago I told you that I want you to begin thinking about how you articulate who Jesus is to you. Who do you say that Jesus is? If someone asked you, do you have an answer? It's not important to have it all figured out, to have all the answers, to be poetic and articulate. I don't have all the answers. The Christian faith is a mystery. Anyone who has ever asked me about my faith or the Christian faith was not looking for a high-minded theological treatise. They were asking because something in their life was out of balance. They needed someone to listen to them and offer simple words of comfort and encouragement and help in finding a direction to go that would help them make their life work better.

I know the way. I hope you do too. I pray that you will be able to find the words to say that will help another re-orient themselves and their lives to the One who is "way, the truth, and the life."

## **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, we get so busy with our blessed lives that we don't often take the time to ponder just who you are, and more importantly, who you are to us. Remind us that while you died on the cross for the forgiveness of all, that "all" becomes more personal when we ponder where we, as individuals, would be without you in our lives. Be ever-present in our hearts and on our minds so that we are more intentional about living godly lives. And make us ready to answer the question, "Who is Jesus to you." We pray this in your name. Amen