

THE MESSAGE

June 13, 2010

Matthew 16:13-25

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Identity (and Purpose)

Finish this sentence “A friend in need is a... (friend indeed).” Mark Twain said this about that proverb, “A friend in need.... is a pain in the neck!”

When it comes to a relationship with Jesus many people see him as either a friend indeed or a pain in the neck. Now before you get up and walk out or decide to tune me out just bear with me for about 15 minutes or so.

Jesus is and desires nothing more than to be a friend to you and me and everyone, right? And yet, at the same time he wants our total obedience.

- He wants to be first in our lives.
- He wants to be able to tell us what we should and what we shouldn't do and get upset with us if we don't do what he says to do.
- He wants us to set our wills aside, our agendas side, and live according to his will his agenda in and for the world.

And that means the way of the cross, that means dying to ourselves and serving others, that means not just coming to church but being the church wherever we happen to be, that means turning things upside-down. I mean Jesus and his ways can be a real pain in the neck...

One day Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” What he is really asking is this, “Do people see me as a friend or a pain in the neck? What do people think I'm here to do?”

From Matthew's Gospel we see that Jesus' identity is wrapped up in what he came to do, and that brings a lot of confusion. Notice the confusion in the answers that Jesus' disciples give.

- Some think Jesus is merely a prophet.
- Others think he is Elijah or Jeremiah.
- Still others think that he is John the Baptist come back to life.

These answers suggests that people knew their Bible especially Deuteronomy 18:18, which says, “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him.”

Jesus then asks his disciples, “What do you think? Who do you say that I am? Am I a friend or a pain in the neck?”

Peter, the one who is never at a loss for words, responds, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus then says several interesting things in response to Peter.

First, Jesus basically says, “Bingo, right answer!” Jesus affirms that he is indeed the Christ, God’s anointed son, the one and only Messiah.

Second, Jesus says that Peter didn’t get this information by any human means. He didn’t figure it out on his own. He didn’t simply repeating what someone else said.

Jesus says that God is the one who revealed this to Peter. That’s an important theological nugget to tuck away. In Martin Luther’s explanation of the third article of the Apostle’s Creed, the part about the Holy Spirit, Luther writes: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me.”

Luther understood that our human mind alone cannot perceive **the truth about Jesus**. It requires divine revelation. This truth has both profound and comforting implications for those who want to grow and share their faith with others.

Third, Jesus says that he will build his church on “this rock.” There is some confusion here as to what Jesus meant.

The Roman Catholic Church has interpreted these words to mean that Peter would be the supreme leader of the church. As Lutherans we interpret these words as the confession of faith upon which the church is built. It’s built on Jesus and our confession of faith in him. Peter was certainly an important leader in the early church but ultimately the confession of faith that Jesus is Lord is the foundation for the church.

So Jesus asks, “Am I a friend or a pain in the neck?” And Peter answers, “You’re the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Notice, that Jesus then warns his disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Christ. What’s up with that? I thought the whole point was to tell the whole world that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah! Why the secrecy? The answer, I believe, is found in the rest of the story.

For the very first time, Jesus begins to talk about his suffering and his death. He tells his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem where he will go head-to-head with the religious leaders, that he will suffer at their hands, be killed, but on the third day rise again.

And Peter’s reaction to this good news? He goes ballistic! Suffering? No way! Dying? No way! That’s not part of the agenda. That isn’t what Peter signed up for. It’s not what he expects. And there is the problem: **expectations**.

At our Synod Assembly this past week, Bishop Mark Hanson, our Presiding Bishop was our keynote speaker and Bible study leader. He said, “Unspoken expectations are resentments waiting to happen.” I know this to be true – I’m married and I have kids. Then he said, “Expectations define our relationships.” I know this to be true – I’m married and I have kids. Then he said, “God shatters our expectations in order for God to do God’s work in our lives.” WOW! How true!

Peter, like many people in his day, expected the Messiah to come and free the nation from oppressive Romans who occupied their land. The Israelites expect the Messiah to bring a military victory to bring their nation into a golden era of freedom and prosperity. Putting it back to the way it was...

So we can imagine, when the disciples witnessed the miracles of Jesus, they felt pretty certain that God was up to something especially now that Jesus has clearly admitted that he *is* the Messiah. And they, the disciples, would be part of the inner circle of it all.

Restoration is the word that comes to mind. They expected Jesus to restore things to the way it was. Jesus’ agenda, his plan was to restore a right relationship between God and God’s people. Jesus drops a bomb. His identity is not wrapped up in political power and military might, but in suffering and death, and anyone who wishes to follow him must also be prepared to suffer and die -- a classic clash of expectations.

(* I have an asterisk here on my notes that I put there this morning as I was reading over this message. I was thinking about your expectations of me and my expectations of you. And we need to discuss those expectations but we will save that conversation for another time...)

The disciples expect victory, power, and prosperity in this life, but Jesus offers a life of rejection, and suffering, and death. No wonder Peter goes ballistic -- no wonder Jesus seems like a pain in the neck sometimes.

The Bible is clear -- if you want to know Jesus, to really know the full identity of the Son of God, the Savior we worship then don’t look to his miracles, look to the cross. On the cross you will see who Jesus really is, and why he came. He came to save the world from sin and death by suffering and dying on the cross. He is God’s suffering servant.

That’s why Jesus tells his disciples not to tell anyone about him being the Messiah. They would only **misinterpret** why he came. Jesus tells them to wait until the cross and the empty tomb to reveal his true identity.

So why does any of this matters? Because if we don’t get this issue of Jesus’ identity straight, we wind up in all sorts of theological, spiritual, and practical trouble. A wrong understanding of Jesus leads to a wrong understanding of God and ourselves.

Truth is, Christians and non-Christians are every bit as confused today about who Jesus is as the early disciples were. Unless, we keep our eyes and our hearts focused on Jesus as the suffering servant of God, we will struggle when life gets tough. In the midst of pain and difficulty, we might begin to wonder if God is punishing us, or if we don't have enough faith, or if God even loves us, or if God even exists at all.

After all, **if God exists and God loves us, we wouldn't suffer.** Right? Wrong!

Consider John the Baptist. Here was Jesus' own cousin, a man who Jesus said was a mighty prophet, a man who obediently followed God's plan for his life, and yet he winds up in prison and at the whim of an evil woman named Herodias. John the Baptist loses his head, literally! What's up with that? Talk about the ultimate pain in the neck. If that kind of thing can happen to John, then it could happen to us.

It could. Jesus does not promise us safety. He invites us to live into a new Kingdom reality, living against a self-focused agenda the world offers and living for God's agenda of self-sacrifice, standing in opposition to the powers that perpetuate violence, greed, exploitation, and oppression of any kind.

How many of you will leave here today and go out and address the oppression we know is going on in the world? How many of you will leave here and go address the greed that is right here in Myerstown? How many of you will leave here and address the violence we see on TV? This is what Jesus expects us to do.

A Jesus' life can be dangerous work. Jesus does not promise us comfort; he promises to comfort us in tough times. Jesus does not promise us material abundance; he promises us abundant life. Jesus does not promise us bodily health; he promises us spiritual wholeness. Jesus does not promise us happiness; he promises us a joy that transcends our circumstances.

Jesus calls us to the way of the cross, a journey that leads to something that matters most: a deep, intimate relationship with the God of all creation, a real life now and forever.

So who is Jesus to you? Who do you say that he is -- **a friend or a pain in the neck?** When you know who Jesus is, you'll know who you are. Our identity flows out of our relationship with him and in him. And then everything is different. That's the truth.

Check out this video -- it captures the truth about God and our relationship in Christ Jesus... <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3hvQJU6sSGo&feature=related>

Jesus offers us a new identity and a new purpose – that's the truth. Amen