

WPC  
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August 21, 2011

A Chip Off the Old Block  
Psalm 124; Matthew 16:13-23

What a question! In the “Cotton Patch Gospel,” when Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” the silence was deafening. They all look at their feet, the floor, the trees, each waiting for the other guy to answer. Most of them eventually start to look Peter’s way, and after a long, thoughtful pause (*Who* do people say that I am? *Who do* people say that I am? Etc.), Peter struggles to give an answer – “Uh...We covered this, didn’t we?”

What a thing to ask a person – Who is this guy, Jesus? It’s the simplest and the toughest question on the final exam, all rolled into one.

Actually, it’s a two-parter, isn’t it? When Jesus asks part A, “Who do people say that I am?” the disciples finally respond with various answers: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets. Certainly Jesus has points of contact with all of these popular understandings of him. Nevertheless, “they all operate at the surface and represent a failure to discern the depth and fullness of Jesus’ identity.”

One commentator notes - “To the popular mind, Jesus is déjà vu: John, Jeremiah, Elijah, or whoever. We’ve seen all this before. Nothing

about Jesus is new, unique, or challenging; he is merely one of the old prophets recycled. The people have turned Jesus, who is a window to the kingdom of heaven, into a mirror. They look at Jesus but see only the reflection of religious ideas from their past.

But these partial, one-sided, and finally mistaken understandings of Jesus held by the people of his day simply serve as a backdrop for the true and full confession of Peter – his final answer to part B: ‘Who do you say that I am?’ Jesus asks the disciples, and Peter steps forward as spokesman: ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’”<sup>1</sup>

Now after blessing Peter, Jesus makes a promise to him. The verse goes like this: “and I tell you, you are Peter (in Greek, *Petros*), and on this rock (in Greek, *petra*) I will build my church.”

Since, in the original Greek, *Petros* and *petra* both mean “rock,” it’s easy to spot this statement as a pun, a play on words: “Your name is ‘rock,’ and on this ‘rock’ I will build my church.” So one interpretation is that Peter is the rock, the foundation, upon which Jesus is going to erect his church. And it’s true: there’s much evidence that Peter played a primary leadership role in the early church.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Long, *Matthew*, p. 184.

However, some interpreters have resisted this interpretation, mainly because it gives special importance to Peter and seems to reinforce later Roman Catholic claims about Peter as the first in a long line of popes. These interpreters have pointed, among other things, to the fact that *Petros* is masculine and *petra* feminine. This grammatical difference, they've argued, indicates that Jesus is referring not to Peter, but to some other "rock" on which he will build his church – maybe on Peter's faith, or on his confession, or, perhaps, on Jesus himself.

But there's another possibility - Barbara Brown Taylor points out the following: "You are *Petros*," Jesus says to him, "and on this *petra* I will build my church." It's the same word he uses twice, the masculine and then the feminine form of the word for rock, but there *is* a subtle difference between the two. *Petros* – the name Jesus gives Peter – means a stone or a pebble, a small piece of a larger rock (i.e., Rocky), while *petra* means a boulder, a mother lode, a great big rock. So that makes Peter literally a chip off the old block, a piece of the rock, against which the powers of death shall not prevail.<sup>2</sup>

It's nothing that he is or says or does all by himself that wins him the keys to the kingdom; he's blessed because his answer is God's answer, and

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, p. 49-50.

he's a rock because he's a chunk off the Rock of Ages. Peter is chosen, but not because the right answer has occurred to him. On the contrary, the right answer has occurred to him because he is chosen, because Jesus decided to "pick a bull-headed, big-hearted, fallible, stubborn, never-say-die rock upon which to build his church."<sup>3</sup>

Peter may not exhibit the flawless character and spiritual depth I would expect to find in the founder of the Christian church, but I'm really glad that he's the one who was chosen. Someone like him may better understand someone like me – someone who sometimes struggles with living out my faith. Or someone who goes ahead and says things and then regrets them, or makes brave promises, like, "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you," (Matt. 26:35) and then loses heart, saying not once but three times, "I do not know the man" (Matt. 26:74).

"If Peter is the rock upon which the church is built then there is hope for all of us, because he is one of us, because he remains God's chosen rock whether he is acting like a cornerstone or a stumbling block, and because he shows us that blessedness is less about perfectness than about willingness –

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<sup>3</sup> Taylor.

that what counts is to risk our own answers, to go ahead and try, to get up one more time than we fall.”<sup>4</sup>

This passage concludes with a mysterious message: Jesus sternly orders the disciples not to let the secret out that he is the Messiah. Why? Why would Jesus not want his disciples to spread the good news? According to Tom Long, “The reason is that there are two ways to distort and misunderstand Jesus: One is to get the word about him all wrong; the other is to get it half right. At this point, the disciples have it right, but only half right. They know that Jesus is truly the Messiah, but they do not yet understand the companion truth: Jesus, the Messiah, must suffer and die. If they were to become evangelists at this moment, they would proclaim a half truth – a cost-free gospel, Jesus without the cross. The disciples do not yet understand this. Until the story is complete, then, they are to remain silent; later they will be commanded to tell the whole truth to the whole world (Matt. 28:19-20), but on this side of the cross, they have only half a truth.”<sup>5</sup>

Final exam time, folks. One essay question, in two parts. Who is Jesus? What do *people* say? And what do *you* say? We’re each here in this church because someone in our lives shared with us the good news about the love of God in Jesus Christ his Son. We know what “people” say. But there

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<sup>4</sup> Taylor.

<sup>5</sup> Long, 187

finally comes a moment when you have to speak for yourself. What do you say? What do I say? And then what do we do?

Notice that we never hear Jesus say at the end of one of his sermons or teachings, “Do you agree?” Rather, what he said was, “Follow me.” Christianity is more than simply a philosophy of life. Christianity is a *way* of life. If we confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, then we need to conform to Christ. In other words, if we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, then we must live as if he is the Messiah. We must not only believe; we must also trust, follow, and obey. That will make a profound difference in how we live our lives, because that belief comes with a cost: the cost of discipleship.

Will Willimon states, “Believing in Jesus would be less of a challenge, I think, if Jesus had only said, ‘I am the light of the world’ (John 5). It’s a great enough challenge just believing that, and living in the light of that belief, “Jesus is the light of the world.” But to make matters even more challenging, Jesus says in Matthew 5:14, some time before his conversation with Peter, ‘*You* are the light of the world.’”<sup>6</sup>

So we’re faced with a great challenge. If we believe what Jesus believes about us, then our lives will change. But the good news is that any

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<sup>6</sup> Willimon, Pulpit Resource, 8-21-11, p. 35.

good work that we do is work that Jesus will do through us, in us, and sometimes even in spite of us. He will walk alongside of us as he uses us to build his church. Thanks be to God. Amen.