

Johns Creek United Methodist Church**Rev. Dr. Charley Reeb****“Who Do You Say That I Am?”****Matthew 16:13-20**

I'm going to say something that is going to surprise some of you. I was a shy kid. Painfully shy. I really was. It was my twin sister who was always in front of people, and I was fine with that. She was always singing, acting and performing in front of people. As a kid, I stayed far away from that. That sort of thing just terrified me. I just stayed in the background and was quiet (if you can believe that!) The whole idea of having to speak to one person face to face, let alone a group, made me uncomfortable.

I really did not come out of my shell until I was in high school. And I have my Dad to thank for that. On this Father's Day I remember what he would tell me. He said, “Charley, when you talk to people, don't look to the ground, look at them. And when you shake someone's hand look them in the eye. Charley, ask that girl out. The worst she can say is no. Charley, ask those kids if they want to play. I'm sure they are dying to have someone to play with.”

My mom helped me, too. One of the most terrifying things to me was when I was assigned to recite poetry or give a speech in school. That worried me sick as a shy kid. It made me so nervous. I never volunteered to speak in class. Never. But there were times when you were given an assignment, and you had to do it. Well, my mom, who was a speech and drama coach, helped me memorize my poem or speech. It made me a little more comfortable, and I was able to get through it.

I still remember some of the poetry I had to memorize and recite. “In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue.” Do you remember the poetry you had to recite in school? “Listen my children and you shall hear of the midnight ride of Paul Revere. On the 18th of April of 75; hardly a man is now alive who remembers that famous day and year.” Or, of course, “Two roads diverge in a wood and I took the one less traveled by, and it has made all of the difference.” I never really had much trouble memorizing the poetry or material. What was troubling to me was having to stand up in front of people and say it out loud. I just couldn't stand having to speak in front of people as a kid. Now, it makes me chuckle to think that I do it for a living!

But as painful as reciting things in school was, church was another thing altogether. In school, you just reported on other people or subjects. Just a lot of facts. But church was something different. It was personal.

Well, I think the disciples in our scripture lesson for today could relate to all of this. Jesus took the disciples to a more private place, Caesarea Philippi. When they got there, he gave them a pop quiz. He asked them for an oral report. It seemed pretty easy at first. “Okay,” said Jesus, “You have been among the people. You have heard the talk on the street corners and in the hallways. What are people saying about me? What are you hearing?”

The disciples think, “Okay this is pretty easy. We can make this report. “Some say you are John the Baptist come back from the dead. Yeah, I’ve heard that. Some people say you are Jeremiah, yeah, I’ve heard that, too. Some say you’re Elijah. Yeah, that is a pretty common view. Good report.” This oral report wasn’t too tough.

But then Jesus looks at each of them and say, “Well, what about you? Who do you say that I am?” Gulp! The oral report suddenly turns personal. The assignment turns into church. That is the thing about church. You can’t always report on what other people are saying. Sometimes you have to say something yourself. It’s tough (Fred Craddock, “The Cherry Log Sermons”).

I remember when I was a teenager in church they would sometimes ask me to read scripture in church. Well, it made me a little nervous. But I could hide behind the good book and just read what Paul wrote or what Matthew said. But I never will forget when I was asked to give my testimony. What? You want me to get up and say something personal? You want me to say out loud what I believe? No, no, no. Wrong person. Pick somebody else. We’ve picked you. Why me? Well, the church wants to hear from you. Can’t I just write it in the newsletter? No. You need to speak to us in church.

It’s not easy to get up and speak to people, especially on a personal level. Public speaking is still listed as one of the top three phobias of people. There is something scary about hearing your own voice in a room. It is still very scary to me. I don’t just speak in public. At my ordination I was told that I was given the authority to speak on behalf of God. You want to talk about scary. It is tough enough to just speak in public. But speaking as an ambassador of God? People often ask me, “Do you get nervous when you preach on Sunday?” You bet I do! I don’t know a preacher who doesn’t!”

I think a lot about what I say to you up here. I spend a lot of time preparing what I say to you from the pulpit. I take it seriously. Sometimes I will be half-asleep on a Sunday afternoon going over what I said to you and I will think, “Did I really say that? I really said that! Wow.”

Fred Craddock reminds us that the things we say in public are important. He reminds us of our court system. When people testify a bailiff takes a Bible and folks put their left hand on it and they raise their right hand. They are asked, “Do you solemnly swear that the testimony you are about to give is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God?” And they have to say publicly, “Yes, I do.”

We, as Americans, recite in public proudly, “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America.” I have said that in front of people. I know you have too. I remember just over 11 years ago I stood at the altar of a church with the most beautiful woman I have ever seen and was asked in front of a lot of people, “Will you have this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?” And I said publicly, “I will.” That meant something. I live my life by that public, “I will.”

Craddock says, “There is something about making a statement in public that makes it binding.” It is a commitment. We don’t have problems with this for the most part. We can say the pledge of allegiance loud and proud. When we see a movie we like, we tell the whole world. And there are some of us who have no problems sending mass e-mails out about our political views.

But there is something different. Something hard. Something tough about speaking publicly about Jesus. The name Jesus said publicly evokes all kinds of things in people. That is tough to face. But when you declare what you believe about Jesus publicly that is the toughest thing you will ever do. For when you do that, you are making a clear statement about who you are and what you believe and how you will live, and people will hold you to it. When we say, “I believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God,” we are taking a stand and making the most powerful and important claim anyone could ever make.

By saying with Peter, “I believe Jesus is the Christ,” we are saying that Jesus is God in the flesh. Jesus is the revelation of God. Jesus is the ultimate expression of God’s love. Jesus is what God is like. Jesus lives in my heart. Why is that so important? Because it is never enough to say, “I believe in God” or “I believe there is a God.” What kind of God do you believe in? People hate in the name of

God. People kill in the name of God. People are racist in the name of God. What kind of God do you believe in? (Craddock).

By saying you believe Jesus is the Messiah, you are saying, “I believe in the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Not in just some vague general warm fuzzy feeling about some higher power. No, the God revealed in Jesus. You know when there was a crowd gathered around Jesus and they wanted to hear him and they were tired and hungry and Jesus fed them? That is what God is like. That is the God we believe in. Do you remember when Jesus gathered little children on his lap and they were giggling and playing and Jesus said, “This is what the kingdom of God is like.” That is what God is like and that is the God we believe in. Do you remember when Jesus was with his disciples and the disciples were arguing about who would be the greatest and Jesus knelt down and washed their feet? That is what God is like and that is the God we believe in. Do you remember when Jesus took that old cross on his shoulder and started up the hill of Golgotha and with blood all over him said, “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.” That is what God is like and that is the God we believe in (Craddock).

I love what Craddock says, “Being a Christian does not mean that you believe in God and then add Jesus. You don’t add anything. It is Jesus Christ who tells us who God is!”

This is why when people join the church we don’t ask them a lot of questions, but we do ask: “Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?” Who do you say that he is? What you believe about Jesus makes all the difference to you and your life. It is the single most important question you could ever answer. No one can answer it for you. Who do you say he is?

Folks are reluctant to admit it. To say it. Even honest to goodness Christians. Oh, they will get on Facebook and happily give their emotional opinions about politics and Covid. But tell their friends about Jesus? “Oh, that is personal matter. I don’t want to offend people...” Well, you just offended half of your friends with your latest political rant, yet you won’t speak a word about Jesus?

Tim Keller is the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York. Keller tells the story of a man who was considering becoming a Christian, but first he wanted to know whether the Bible precluded homosexuality and other moral and political issues. Rev. Keller responded by asking the man whether he believed Jesus rose from the grave. “I don’t know,” said the man. Keller replied, “If you

don't believe that Jesus literally rose from the dead, why does it matter what the Bible says about homosexuality?"

Keller went on to tell the man that if ever he did believe that Jesus rose from the dead, what the Bible said about homosexuality would be the least of his concerns. He'd have to change the way he thought about success and ambition and money and possessions and love and forgiveness and relationships, well, just about everything else including sex. Beliefs make all the difference, and if you believe Jesus rose from the dead, then that means you believe Jesus is who the Bible declares him to be. Commenting on Keller's remarks, King Duncan says, "If you believe what the Bible says about Jesus you have to live your life differently because what you believe changes your life. And if it doesn't change your life, then you don't really believe it (referenced in King Duncan, "The Great Divide")."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian who was executed by Hitler during World War II. Years later, one of his students recalled the last classroom session he had with his teacher. The class was winding down and Bonhoeffer knew this would be his last class before his arrest. So, he was moved to ask his students a question, a question that took them by surprise. He asked them if they loved Jesus. This is not the typical question one hears in a seminary classroom. Usually the classroom is reserved for more academic questions. But Bonhoeffer knew this was the important question of all. This question stands above all others. Do you love Jesus? (King Duncan, "Does It Make Any Difference Who Jesus Is?").

Jesus turned to his disciples and asked them, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ." Is that the answer you would give today? Are you willing to say that publicly to your friends and family? Have you met the person you believe in? Do you love Jesus? Everything depends on how we answer the question. Amen.

