

Text: Matthew 16:13-20

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ. (NIV84)

Prayer of the Day:

Almighty and everlasting God, give us an increase in faith, hope, and love: and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Sermon Text:

“Are you successful?” How do you know? Perhaps you go the route of materialism. If so then you will talk about stuff, bank accounts and the amount of things you have accumulated. Of course the problem here is that stock markets can fail, stuff can break and unless you’re at the top, there is always someone more successful than you and ultimately you can’t take one penny with you, even if you lock it all away in pyramid for the afterlife, all that happens is a grave robber finds a treasure.

You could try the path of emotionalism as well. In such a case success is found in your feelings. I’m successful because I’m happy. I’m loved. I feel like I’ve made a difference. Do you hear it there? It’s a bunch of focus on self and on what just might be one of the most volatile aspects of self, my emotion which turn on a dime depending on the wind that blows that day.

Regardless of which path I take, one of these isms or one from millions of philosophies in the grab bag of humanity, do you see what is happening? I’m defining me, whether it’s a reality I currently enjoy or what I aspire to be, and for many, the extent to which they are able to attain whatever it is they deem important, directly effects the way they view their self-worth in the world around them. Are You successful or not?

Today, Jesus asks the questions, “*Who do people* (v13) *Who do you say I am* (v15).” Now it’s the third time we’ve said it in as many weeks, Jesus (God) never asks a question because He lacks the correct answer. Instead, the answer will always reveal or teach a truth. Today, as we focus on Christ, we learn about what makes a successful church and **A SUCCESSFUL CHURCH = A ROCK AND TWO KEYS.**

Notice the answers Jesus gets first. He asks, *Who do people say the Son of Man is?* ¹⁴ *They* (the disciples) *replied*, “*Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.*” Huh, the second Elijah the first Elijah and a bunch of their compatriots but not a single correct answer from the people out there in Jesus day. Of course, that’s not entirely surprising. Not much has changed today.

It was interesting to recently hear from a newspaper that Jesus had admitted that he was not perfect in Scripture. Personally, I know of no such passage nor was one quoted ... that’s because one doesn’t exist. The Righteousness One (1 John 2:1), the unblemished Lamb (1 Peter 1:19) is the one who was tempted like us in every way but remained without sin (Hebrews 4:15). But then that’s not really new. Jesus has been stripped of His divinity, dragged through the cesspool of false accusation, even been made the father of special line of human beings.

I wish I could say I haven’t at times fallen into line in the quest for a Jesus other than the one the Scriptures preach. It’s easy to reduce Jesus and His teachings to the rule book which makes me better than

others. It's even easier to think of Jesus as the person who tells me I'm right and someone else is wrong. "I love Jesus so whether I'm breaking every teaching He has given or not I'm good."

That's what makes Peter's answer so remarkable. He sets aside everything he is looking for from Jesus and simply confesses the truth. He is the one that has been promised in the pages of Holy Scripture. He is the Savior. Which is to say, Peter needs a Savior.

You see that's what John the Baptist was looking for as He pointed to Jesus and announced, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. That's what Elijah and the other prophets were looking for as well. One who would do what we couldn't. Who would travel to the cross for our sins and who would promise something better than the fleeting fancies of a sinful world. His resurrection assures us of a home in heaven and makes us members of the Church of God.

These aren't truths which are gained by our philosophical searching, or the deductive powers of the sinful minds of men. It's a truth gained by the grace of God, a free gift granted by the Father, who sent this Savior for all people, who sends His Spirit into hopelessly confused hearts that we might grasp the truths taught for centuries in the pages of His Holy Word. So Jesus says, "*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.*"¹⁸ *And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*"

There is the rock not Peter as some falsely claim but Christ and everything He has done for us. and so we have established the first and most important mark of a successful Christian Church. It has a solid foundation, a rock solid foundation, the rock of Christ and Him crucified for us.

That knowledge will change those who belong to Jesus' Church, those who belong to the one true church. So Jesus continues, "*I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*"

As people who see clearly, we will seek to help those who still wander about in the confusion of the world around them. We shine the bright light of God's Word into their lives exposing sin as the danger that it is and holding out the forgiveness that isn't only ours but which was won for every sinner in the suffering and death of Jesus.

Yes, that will mean announcing that when people are following things other than Christ that they are chasing after no hope at all, in the hope that we will be able to point them to the one thing needful. We'll do it as the Church. As people who realize that there but by the grace of God we would be as well, but eternally grateful that in Christ's blood and righteousness we stand in the firm hope of heaven. We'll want others to stand with us, so we, like Peter, will confess Christ, in a world which is hopelessly confused about who He is.

Who do you say the Son of Man is? That's is a pointed question that shows where our faith truly sits. Is He really the promised Messiah, long foretold in Scripture who came to save? Is He really God in flesh for the salvation of all? Are we among those who really need Him, not just so that life can be easier here, but so that we might have life in the world to come? And where do we find out about Him? My own feelings and emotions? My own opinions of what is right and what is wrong? My own success or failure? Or is He clearly revealed to us in the pages of Scripture promised for centuries and given in a manger in Bethlehem that He might be better than me, better for me as supplies the righteousness a sinner like me needs, as He dies the death I deserve, to rise that I might live with Him forever? And if He is, shouldn't I tell others, warn others, calling sin what is it, destructive delusions of the Devil that we might point the only answer that means heaven for all even as it means heaven for me? Yes, Yes, a thousand times yes! We'll use the keys of the church the binding and loosing keys, God's law that exposes sin and His Gospel which illuminates our Savior that all may know of and grow in His amazing truth.

So, what makes a church successful? Numbers? Programs? Pastors? Her people? Nope those will all come and go and all will be marked with sin. A successful church will stand on the only one who successfully did all God promised and defeat our enemies for us. It will hold tightly to the truth of Christ and Him crucified, the doctrines, the teachings of God's holy Word and then it will apply that Word to everything it does and everyone it comes into contact with. **A SUCCESSFUL CHURCH = A ROCK AND TWO KEYS.** By God's grace may this always be the mark of St. Paul's, the Wisconsin Evangelical Synod, and everyone of us. Amen!