

Orthodoxy and Orthopraxis  
Matthew 16:13-20  
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August 23, 2020

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

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Jesus asks two questions in this passage. The first one is an easy lobbed ball. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” The disciples shout out answers, trying to one up each other and share what their specific group might be saying. “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” This is a simple and straightforward question. It is impersonal and does not require any inner reflection.

What would people say in our day? Who do people say that Jesus is? I imagine you can find a whole range of ideas and thoughts about who Jesus is. Jesus is the great and moral teacher who offers a different way of living. Jesus is the white gun-toting savior. Jesus was a spiritual leader who offered people a future salvation away from the body. Jesus is a nice guy to listen to on Sundays but leaves us alone the rest of the week. These questions remain in the theoretical and we could debate the pros and cons, the truth and lies until we were blue in the face.

But this question is only the beginning of the discussion. Because now Jesus turns the questions onto his best friends. “Who do you say that I am?” This question requires much more self-reflection and intimacy. The disciples have spent time with Jesus, heard his teachings, seen his miracles, shared meals together, and traveled from town to town together. “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus asks. And I imagine after the quick and easy answers from the first question that this one leaves a space of silence after it. A pondering and chewing of the depth of meaning in this question. What is the right answer or better yet what is the true answer for each of them?

Then Peter, good ol’ Peter, jumps forward, unable to bear the silence and says, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” There is so much in this statement, and many would have you believe that this is where we end on our

journeys of faith, with the correct naming of Jesus. There is a belief that stating your beliefs, confessing your values is all you need. That all you have to do is say the magic words and then you are done. You got your ticket to heaven, your life will be changed, your prayers answered if you just say the right words.

But this, my friends, is only the beginning. The question and answer of who we say Jesus is, is the start of our journey. Because we can never fully understand the Messiah who is the Son of the living God. There is so much more to learn and grow and do than can fit neatly into ten words, like the ten words Peter shouts out. A whole life time more.

Because while Peter is correct on the paper test, he still has much to learn about how to live that out. To turn that head knowledge into heart knowledge. We see Peter go out from here and continue to live as if someone else has more power and more love than Jesus, we see him hide from his connection and deny Jesus, we see him try and tell Jesus about how the Messiah should live. Because while Peter got the words right he still had much more to learn and grow and do before those words sunk in and became a lived reality. Saying the right words, and living those words, while they are connected, are not the same thing.

In the Christian tradition we have fancy names for these two things, orthodoxy, which means correct belief, and orthopraxis, which means correct

practice. The American Christian tradition has staked a lot of its emphasis on orthodoxy, correct belief. We have systems like the sinner's prayer as all you need to get to heaven. We have creeds and confessions that try and state what we believe to be true and we expect that to be enough. As you look around the world we see people making statements denouncing white supremacy and declaring that racism is wrong. But words must reflect our actions and our actions must be inspired by our words.

After Peter's great proclamation of faith, Jesus tells them to speak of this to no one. But how do they build the church that Jesus meant without speaking, without using words, without telling people what Jesus did and said? The answer is simple to speak out loud, orthopraxis, correct action, but more complicated as we realize that this living requires our whole life. We cannot just make statements about who we are or what we believe, we must follow up these words with action. And this action is not a one time thing. It is not one event or lecture or book. It is a lifetime of learning and growing and acting and doing. It is a lifetime of trying and making mistakes, of hoping and failing, of loving and living.

There is no simple path, there are no ten steps to a faithful life. It is a lifetime of journeying. And that is why it is essential that we do it together, the ekklesia, the church, that Jesus is talking about building. Because on our own we

will not make it. But together we can keep going forward. Together we can help carry others when they are tired and be carried when we start to fall as well. And Jesus says, “on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” We continue on as the living church, the living legacy of Jesus the messiah, the Son of the living God. And they will know us by our love, our actions, our living.

How are you living today? Do your words match your actions? How are we showing the world God’s love? In the lived action of our day to day lives, the kingdom of heaven opens up to us and we experience the grace and love of our Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Let us go out in love and life. Amen.

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