

Matthew 16:13-20

Jesus is traveling toward Jerusalem when he takes a break in gentile country, in a city that is known for its worship of the pagan gods Baal and Pan. In Jesus' day it had a temple to Caesar, it was a playground for the wealthy who had summer homes there, and a center of gambling and violent places. Not a place where you would think that Jesus would address his disciples with the question, "Who do people say that I am?" Evidently when they answer the disciples do not consider their current location. They tell Jesus that people think he is a prophet. The disciples name the well known ancient Jewish prophets Jeremiah and Elijah, and, something that makes no sense at all because he had just recently passed, John the Baptist. Then Jesus asks them, "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter, impetuous, outspoken Peter, speaks up for all of the disciples when he says, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God." He could not have known that answer without a revelation from God. Jesus recognizes this, and recognizes Peter's willingness to listen to the Spirit's prompt when he tells Peter that he has spoken the truth, and because of his willingness to follow the Spirit's prompting Jesus calls Peter the rock upon which the church will be built.

If you were to ask a group of people with whom you spend a lot of time and who know you well, "Who do you say that I am?" what responses would you hear? Of course your name, perhaps you'd hear that you are a good chess player, a teacher, a nurse, a mom or dad or uncle or aunt or cousin. A nice person. A good employee. A retiree. A busy person. And a myriad of other possible descriptions. But would you hear, "You are a Christ follower"?

How important is it to you to know that others consider you a Christ follower? Is it high on your priority list? How do people know anyway?

Of course you could simply tell them that you believe in Jesus. Yet there's a difference between believing in Jesus and following Jesus. You can know who Jesus is without doing what Jesus did. It's a clear decision to follow Jesus the Christ, and it is one that no one else can make for you. You have to make it for yourself; you can't be a Christ follower just because your parents or grandparents were Christ followers, you have to make a conscious decision to allow Jesus into your heart to guide you. And, yes, you do need to know who Jesus is before you can follow him.

Jesus is the son of God, the only human who never sinned. We can try to follow Jesus, but we will never truly be like Jesus. That doesn't mean we are supposed to stop living a life that looks to Jesus for direction. And his direction is most often opposite of what the world would have us do.

Want to keep up with the Jones' or to have the same things your best friend has? That isn't following Jesus. Jesus lived a plain, simple life; he was able to carry all his possessions as he walked from town to town. That doesn't mean we need to live completely austere lives, but it does mean that we don't live above our income, and we don't have more than what we need. I know I fall way short there... I have a closet full of clothes that I don't need. I just haven't prioritized my time to sort through them and donate them. What is it that you have too much of?

Jesus rarely got angry. Yes, there was definitely a time Jesus was angry enough to clear what he saw as thieves from the temple. He overturned the tables of the money changers, and chased out anyone who was buying or selling in the temple. There is a time for righteous anger. But being angry without a purpose is not Christ-like. Yes, anger is an emotion most all of us experience, but it should not be expressed in ways that harm other people. Find ways to work out your anger such as breathing deeply from your diaphragm; breathing from your chest won't relax you. Picture your breath coming up from your "gut." Another technique is to slowly repeat a calm word or phrase such as "relax," "take it easy." Repeat it to yourself while breathing deeply. Or you may be able to use imagery; visualize a relaxing experience, from either your memory or your imagination. Practice these things daily because finding ways to relax when you are not angry helps you to control your anger when it occurs. It is not healthy to push your anger away and not address it; it will only build up to a time when you feel as though you will explode.

Jesus spent time with other people sharing his story. Jesus spoke in parables that were at times hard to understand. We don't need to cloak our story inside of difficult to understand stories. We can be authentic and talk about how Jesus has changed our lives. We can tell our stories without fear to show how Jesus has worked in and through our lives.

Jesus shared time with the wealthy, the religious men, the poor persons, and those who others thought shouldn't be included in their lives. Jesus went to the house of a tax collector, Zaccheus, and through listening to Jesus Zaccheus understood that he had stolen money from people even though what he was doing was perfectly legal. Zaccheus returned money to those whom he overcharged and vowed not to cheat them again. Jesus was invited to eat at a Pharisee's house where a woman entered and anointed his feet with oil. Jesus ate with over 5,000 people on a hillside. There was no one whom Jesus excluded from hearing his message. In our reading from Romans today Paul tells us, "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned."

We, too, can share our message of life with all people. We can share the message that God loves us no matter who we are. We can share the message that there is unlimited forgiveness found through Christ. There is nothing other than claiming that God is powerless that cannot be forgiven. Again and again and again. Jesus proclaimed God's love and forgiveness, God's mercy and grace, that we receive not because we have earned it, not because we deserve it, but because God wants us to draw closer to God through Jesus Christ.

Jesus told Peter that what he had loosed on earth was loosed in heaven. A discussion group I am part of considered that this could be seen as forgiveness. We forgive others so we do not have to carry the burden of pain, so we can let loose of the negative emotions that we carry with us when we hold grievances against another person. Forgiveness is more of a benefit for us than it is for the person whom we forgive. Some things are easily forgiven, we can just let it go. Other, more deeply inflicted pain may take a process of forgiveness. We know that we have fully forgiven when we can recall the painful incident without feeling the emotions that we felt when the harm was inflicted. The other person doesn't need to ask for forgiveness, the other person doesn't even need to know about your forgiveness. It is between you and Jesus.

Jesus is compassionate. When he saw a person who was in need of help, he helped. We can do the same in whatever form that takes for us. Sometimes we can reach out and help another person, sometimes we can send money for an agency to help people, and sometimes all we can do is pray for the person.

When thinking of all the things that are entailed when a person follows Jesus, a simple life, being slow to anger, considering all people to be worthy of God's love and expressing that love through compassion and forgiveness, how do you measure up? Are you a Christ follower, or do you just know about Jesus? And how important is it to you that you are known as a Christ follower? It may be the most important thing in life.

All glory be to God.