

**Sunday, August 27, 2017 – Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**“Zeroing in on the Truth”**

Matthew 16: 13-20

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Story Interrupted Structure

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

They were a long, long ways away. You know how it is – you’re traveling and everything about where you are is foreign, it’s unfamiliar. The people are different, the vegetation is different, the land is different. You don’t fit in, and the people around you don’t understand.

Our text from the book of Matthew starts with Jesus and His disciples in Caesarea Philippi. If you were here last week you heard how Jesus and the disciples passed into the region of Tyre and Sidon, way to the north, outside of the historic bounds of Israel, a pagan area, where a Canaanite woman cried out to Jesus for mercy. Well now they’re even farther to the north. It’s quite possibly the farthest Jesus ever went from Jerusalem during His years of earthly ministry. They’re very, very far from what is familiar, what is welcoming, what is home.

Jesus and His disciples have also never been so far away socially. Early in Jesus’ ministry the Pharisees, Sadducees and teachers of the law, the religious elite, were curious onlookers, evaluating His teaching. As He gained favor with the crowds they grew concerned. As the elites questioned Him, they got hostile. Jesus, once the toast of the town was now as appealing as burnt toast to the leaders. Jesus has cried out, “Woe to you,” He has told them they don’t know God, He has called them unclean and referred to their teachings as “yeast,” lies that lead to rot and decay. It’s not just the religious leaders, either – Herod has arrested Jesus’ cousin, the prophet called John the Baptist, and beheaded him. The establishment is far from finding Jesus’ teachings familiar, far from welcoming, far from home.

It is now apparent that you can’t just leave the “Jesus question” unsettled. You can’t sit on the fence. There are sides. Just who exactly is He? The Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes have made up their minds – they say He’s from the devil, they say by the devil’s power He’s driving out demons. Even Jesus’ cousin John the Baptist wanted to know – are you the one we’ve been waiting for, or should we expect someone else?

“Who is this guy?!” is the question that has been driving the book of Matthew forward for the past 6 chapters. Here, on the outer fringes, outcasts, away from the familiar, welcoming

world where the established leaders seem to be in control, Jesus asks the question – “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

This is such a big question. People wrestle through this question to this day. Who is Jesus? What does He stand for? Am I with Him or not? This question has such big repercussions that we’re going to spend both this week and next looking at it. This week we’ll zero in on the truth and arrive at the answer and next week, we’ll have Jesus blow us away with what that truth means.

When I get to teach middle school kids in Confirmation it brings back my own memories of being in school. You can picture the scene, right? Teacher asks a question. A few hands go up. At least one is the kid who likes to answer every question, and they’re often right, and their hand is raised really high, they’re half standing out of their seat, straining in their reach, the international symbol for “Pick me!” But a good teacher won’t just call on the same kid over and over again, you want to engage everyone. So sometimes the question will go around 5, 6, 7 times as wrong or partially but not fully right answers come forward. It’s a helpful exercise for learning. I call it zeroing in. Zeroing in means we’re getting closer to the answer, but we’re not quite there and along the way, you can praise what’s right and also dismiss what doesn’t work about the answer.

“Who do people say the Son of Man is?” Some say John the Baptist. Now Matthew, the author of our text already told us a couple of chapters ago who thought that – King Herod, who had just beheaded John the Baptist – he heard reports about what this Jesus was doing and said (I paraphrase), “Whoa, this guy sounds a lot like John who I just killed – it’s Him come back to life to haunt me!” John the Baptist stood for a lot of things. He called on people to repent – turn away from their sin. He spoke the truth to authority, no matter what the cost. This answer compares Jesus to John, the truth teller and humanitarian. He encourages people to do right and speaks up to the establishment. To be sure, Jesus does that but if that were all we could include him as one in a long line with Gandhi, Dr. King or Nelson Mandela. Others say Elijah – it was prophesized in the book of Malachi that before the end, the prophet Elijah would return. You remember Elijah – persecuted during the time of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, one of two people in the Old Testament who was taken up alive to Heaven without first dying – here,

Jesus is a great prophet meant to say that the end is almost here – Jesus is that same Elijah, who never died and now 800 years old, back in disguise. To be sure Jesus' coming does usher in the beginning of the end of this age, but Jesus will most definitely die – more on that next week. Others say Jeremiah – in this case not the actual Jeremiah but someone like Jeremiah, a prophet who will undergo a ton of pain and torment and rejection as a prophet of doom ready to talk about death and destruction. For His part, Jesus certainly has done and will do a lot of that.

None of these descriptions on their own are enough. Nor are these descriptions combined enough. And it's certainly not the description of the Pharisees, Sadducees and teachers of the law, that Jesus is under the spell of the devil who is right. If Jesus is just a humanitarian figure He may be inspirational, even able to transform a person or an entire culture, one in line of many figures, but just one. If Jesus is Elijah yeah that's special, a major prophet who God took to Himself without even having to die and that's super cool – but all He would be here to do is to speak truth and tell you to watch for God to come. If Jesus is Jeremiah he could suffer horrendously but when it's all over, you're left with nothing more than a martyr, even if for a noble cause.

And folks, a lot of people in our world today lack hope because even the very best the world has to offer can only deliver up to a point. In a world full of transformational figures in history, and people who speak truth and point you toward God, and martyrs who suffer for noble causes we're still left disenfranchised, foreigners in a strange world that we live in but are not part of – what we need is some full on truth that delivers us home. You know that struggle and so do I of all the John the Baptists and Elijahs and Jeremiahs that can deliver only up to a point. You know what it is to suffer under – “Is this as good as it gets? Is this all there is? Is this the best we can do?” When you find yourself in that place, know that you're zeroing in on the truth and know that your longing and wishing and crying out from the depths of your soul shows that our cries and pleas for help are zeroing in, starving for some pure, perfect truth.

Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” And Simon, renamed Peter, “The Rock” by Jesus for this answer – of course, it's him, the one who is always eager to speak, ready with an answer, not even waiting for Jesus to call on him and he blurts out truth: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Christ in Greek, Hebrew in Messiah is an office. It's a job title – that's why I say, "Jesus, the Christ at my greeting every sermon. Major transformative figures, truth telling prophets who point the way to God and suffering martyrs need not apply – pieces of them match up, some of their resume matches the job description but only one is big enough to fill these shoes and even John the Baptist wasn't worthy to untie those sandals. Christ or Messiah is a job that means, "Prophet, priest and king." Prophet – who speaks the truth of God. Priest – who offers up the blood sacrifice for sin. King – who rules over all. Not just any prophet, priest or king but the absolute elite, perfect form of each – THE prophet, THE priest, THE king, the all time for eternity G.O.A.T. – greatest of all time – in all three. No one else's stats can compare. He spoke nothing but truth through His perfect life and preaching ministry, offered up a perfect, once and for all sacrifice for the sin of the entire world and rules as King over everything, ultimately ready to transform not just a life or a culture but the entire cosmos to make them perfect once more.

That my friends, is the TRUTH that everything about the Christian life rises and falls upon – Jesus is the Christ, my prophet priest king – our whole Church is built on confessing that truth – but be warned – it's not all pomp and circumstance, power and glory. Next week Jesus is going to blow Peter out of the water – and He is going to blow us out of the water – with what living in that truth means for Him, as well as for us. In Jesus' name, Amen.