

Who Is Jesus?

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Matthew 16:13-20

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This is my faith about Jesus in a nutshell. Jesus is the Messiah, the savior, the one who gives abundant life by healing our souls. Why do I believe this?

Because I have come to believe that, as scripture says, God is servant love. And it is God's servant love that reveals Jesus to me. Belief in Jesus comes, for me, not by determined agreement with creedal statements, but by an undeniable inward confidence that in Jesus I have found someone who unfailingly loves me and helps me.

We know we have found our savior when we are inwardly convicted that Jesus is the messiah. And once inwardly convicted, there is an outward sharing of the salvation we know in acts of compassion and justice. It has taken me a long time to get here and I am still in the process of learning.

Along the way I have had several guides. One of those was Melvin Wheatley, my first Bishop. Though Bishop Wheatley is now retired and suffers dementia, he remains one of my heroes.

In one of his sermons, Bishop Wheatley told a story of driving through Cody, Wyoming and seeing a bumper sticker on a car in front of him that read, "Follow me to Jesus." He said he got to musing on what might happen should he, without further investigation, mindlessly follow the car in front of him in hopes of finding Jesus.

The car was from out of state and so following it would have led him far away from Cody. Further, since the car was probably on vacation, there is no telling what side trips he might end up taking. And finally, the bumper sticker may have belonged to a previous owner and there was no guarantee the current owner was ever really interested in Jesus.

Bishop Wheatley went on to say that before we follow anyone to Jesus, we had better give it some careful observation and thought. Not everyone who announces they are the way to Jesus actually leads to Jesus.

Jack Freeman told me a similar story from his life. It seems he and some others needed to quickly hire a fishing guide. They didn't know the guide they hired, nor had they any recommendations for him. The guide turned up on the appointed day, collected his money, took them to the river, and proceeded to get drunk. Choose your guide, wherever you want to be led, carefully.

I have chosen Bishop Wheatley as one of the guides of my life, not only because of his wise words, but because of how he lived his life and faith. A story from his early life as a pastor illustrates Wheatley's faithful leading.

You know that during WWII, Japanese Americans were detained and sent to internment camps across the nation. At the time, Mel Wheatley was a young pastor in Southern California. One of the families in his church, the Sanos, was Japanese-American. When the Sanos were forced to leave, Bishop Wheatley and his family moved

into the Sano home. During the whole while of the Sanos' internment, Melvin and Lucille Wheatley protected the Sano home and kept it safe. And so when the internment camps released their prisoners, unlike many other Japanese-American families, the Sano family still had a home to which to return.

Later, the Sanos' son Roy became a United Methodist pastor and then Bishop. Roy Sano was my second Bishop. Further more, Bishop Sano told this story at Yellowstone Annual Conference when it was being held in Powell, Wyoming, just 15 miles from the Heart Mountain Japanese Internment Camp where the Sanos had been imprisoned. Bishop Sano was now Bishop over the camp in which he was once a prisoner.

Bishop Wheatley also taught me that in following Jesus, we make many choices, some of them with significant consequences. In this vein, he talked about how important it was to check in with God when making our decisions. Mel Wheatley is the one who taught me to look for "inner conviction" in my following Jesus. By "inner conviction," he meant that when making a decision, especially a decision that is life changing or difficult, we must look inward, listen to the voice of our heart as it is the voice of God, and seek an inner consent with which we might proceed and live.

"Inner conviction," being guided by the still, small voice of God, is not like the radio. We cannot simply turn it on and off whenever we want to hear a little something divine. If our inner conviction is to be more than hearing ourselves think and speak, then it is necessary for us to give God time to speak to us. We are not in charge of God's speaking, no matter how much we would like to command it. Hearing the voice of God within must be practiced in regular prayer, so that when the hard times come, we are already wired to listen for the salvation God would give.

Furthermore, hearing the voice of "inner conviction" is cultivated not primarily in our speaking to God, but in our silent listening for God by study and meditation.

Jesus recognizes that it is the inner voice of conviction that leads Simon Peter to know and pronounce Jesus the savior. As Jesus observes, it is not flesh and blood that has revealed this to him, but Jesus' father in heaven. Flesh and blood think of Jesus as perhaps the return of John the Baptist, Elijah, or Jeremiah. But Peter sees in Jesus not only these great prophets/teachers of the past, but someone more who is the messiah, Peter's savior, and the savior of the world.

Because Peter knows the truth about him, Jesus appoints Peter the keeper of the keys for our way into the kingdom of God. Peter is the gatekeeper, a sort of guide to the faith.

The keeper of the keys to the city gates played a very important role in walled cities. They were in charge of the safety for the whole village. You could go about your day knowing that should there be a sudden attack by enemies, the gatekeeper would lock the gates. And you could sleep at night, because the gatekeeper locked

the gates against criminals and wild animals. For this reason, gatekeepers, like guides, must be chosen carefully. They must be someone that can be trusted with the lives, children, and wealth of others. In order for gatekeepers to be effective, they must be trusted.

And so we are back to Wheatley's question, who will we trust to lead us to Jesus? Who do we trust that might hold the keys of the kingdom for us? There are those who would provide us with quick, cheap, and easy answers. And there are those who would lead us in circles of deepening confusion. We live in a time when we are skeptical about anyone who says, "Trust me." We have seen too many religious zealots, from all faiths, become robbers and murderers in the name of God. Who, then, do we trust?

Will we trust the bumper sticker on the car in front of us, some preacher with a gift for gab, a neighbor, an author, a particular interpretation of the Bible? Who will guide us to Jesus the messiah, our savior?

It is uncertain that we can even trust ourselves. We know how easily we can fool ourselves into believing that God would lead us to salvation in a job, a relationship, a possession, when it wasn't God at all, but our own determined desires.

I cannot answer the "trust" question for you. I can tell you what I believe and hope it assists you in knowing what you believe.

For me, the more I let God in Jesus and the Holy Spirit lead me, the more I become convinced that what makes Jesus my and our savior is his love lived in compassion and justice. I believe that what Simon knows in Jesus that makes him see not only a great prophet, but also the messiah, is Jesus' conviction to compassion and justice.

Jesus cared about everyone he met, whether they were rich or poor, male or female, adult or child, well or ill, powerful or powerless, Jew or Gentile. And Jesus wanted justice for everyone he met. He wanted women to have the same opportunities for healing and power as men. He wanted the non-children of Abraham to have the same advantages in life as the children of Abraham. Peter sees this and so calls Jesus the messiah, the one who will set the world free from life's injustice and to life's compassion.

All this is pretty predictable, after all, Peter is a disciple of Jesus, and we ought to expect him to get it (though in Mark's gospel he and the other disciples have considerable trouble getting it). And it seems fairly predictable that Peter and the other disciples would become responsible, after Jesus' death, for sharing the good news of compassion and justice and the nature of God.

But there is, as usual, a surprise in Jesus' words when he also says to Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."¹

¹ Matthew 16:19

Peter not only has the keys that will keep us safe and lead us into grace in this life, he has the responsibility to use those keys for Jesus-like compassion and justice on earth and in heaven. With being a disciple of Jesus comes not only responsibility for the lives of this world, but the very shape of heaven.

When my children were learning to drive, I was nervous. Learning to drive and dealing with growing up at the same time is dangerous. My daughters had so many fender benders in their learning years that the auto body shop owner knew the sound of my voice on the telephone.

Vickie and I knew that every time we gave Erika or Johanna the keys to the car, they not only had great freedom to travel the city and be with friends, but they were also taking on responsibility for their lives and the lives of others. One bad judgment by them or some other driver, and there was the potential for something serious, maybe even death, to happen.

So it is with our faith. Once we understand Jesus' love, his healing compassion, and righteous justice as the salvation of our lives, the salvation of the world and the revelation of God, then we also understand the great and grave responsibility we hold for the lives around us, on earth and in heaven. Because we know the power love has over life, we know the power we have over the lives of others. We can bless them with a smile and curse them with a scowl. We can lift others with our hope and confidence, or crush them with our pessimism and skepticism. By the power of God's love, we have the power to do great good and great harm. What we loose or bind on earth is also what happens in heaven. As heirs to Peter, we hold the keys to heaven and earth.

I know that I, and this congregation's leadership, are about to ask a difficult thing for many of you in asking us to live up to our mission "to reach out and make Disciples of Christ." We are attempting to again grow this worship service, which means you are being asked to invite those without a church. We are striving to increase the membership of existing small groups and to add new small groups of disciples which means, if you are not already a member of a small group, to become a member and to bring others with you. We want to expand our mission to the homeless and hurting world, which means you will be asked to make sacrifices of time and wealth. I know that actually asking someone to come with you to worship, or a small group, or a servant project, opens the doors of being too pushy, or the possibility of straining, maybe losing a relationship, or even being rejected.

But I think we are in a time that requires us to take the risk for the sake of others as Jesus and Peter took the risk for us. If this building were on fire, you would tell your neighbor, stranger or not, and help them find their way to safety. You would not think a second about whether this was the right thing to do, or whether you were being too pushy, or whether they might or might not like you. With the building on fire, none of that matters.

I think the world is on fire. I think people are being burned while we try to stay safely tucked away, avoiding risk and protecting ourselves and those closest to us. I think those who believe Jesus is the messiah need to be telling others and inviting them to discover what has become apparent to us: that God loves us; stays with us and for us; that God saves us through the passion of Christ.

Who is Jesus? Jesus is the messiah. Shalom and Amen.