



Who Do You Say?

Calvary Church, United Methodist
Sermon by Rev. John Mueller, Jul 11, 2004

Scripture Reading: Matthew 16:13-20

¹⁶ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' ¹⁴ And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' ¹⁵ He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' ¹⁷ 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. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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.' ²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Sermon:

In our little "welcome" cards that we have in the pews - cards that give some basic information about who we are as a congregation for those visiting - there is a statement which says, "As Methodists, scripture, tradition, experience and reason guide us in our spiritual quest." And indeed, this statement lifts up an important gift that we have received over the years from one of the founders of our denomination, John Wesley. Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illuminated by tradition, brought to life through personal experience, and confirmed by reason. In short, through his preaching, teaching and ministry, he demonstrated that these four guides are at our disposal, as we try to discern what God's will is for our lives. Methodists have come to call these four sources for "doing theology" the quadrilateral. If we desire to continue to grow in our faith scripture, tradition, reason and experience need to be taken seriously.

United Methodists believe that each one of these sources has an important role to play in helping us come to know God more fully. Therefore, we also believe that each of these four sources needs to be held in balance with each other. That is, we can't rely too heavily on one without paying attention to the others. For example we'll get into trouble if we give too much weight to scripture, while ignoring experience, reason and tradition. Similarly we'll greatly diminish our sense of the sacred if we rely too heavily on reason, neglecting the witness of scripture, tradition and personal experience. The quadrilateral can be a very valuable tool for people of faith, for people who are trying to be intentional about their spiritual formation and maturation.

Today, I'd like to reflect a little on one of these four sources, experience. The reason why I'd like to do so is because it seems to me that of the four, this one is the least understood, the least trusted, and often the most under-developed. I'd also like to say that of these four, although many Methodists feel that scripture is primary, I believe that personal experience is primary. I can give you a variety of reasons for this conclusion. One example might come from looking at what scripture says about women in the church and their relationship to men. The Bible says some pretty troubling things about women at times. It can be quoted to say that women shouldn't speak in worship, that women shouldn't lead men, that wives should obey their husbands, and that generally women should be subservient to men. And indeed for years and years, scripture was looked to as an authority on this, justifying inequality between the sexes. Women were refused the right to vote, to be ordained, to have certain civil rights, hold leadership positions, and a variety of other things based on a particular reading of what is in the Bible.

We're still struggling with the repercussions of this interpretation today. I just read in the *Boston Globe* that Wal-Mart has been slapped with a class action suit involving 1.6 million women. Wal-Mart Incorporated, the world's largest private employer, has been charged with systematically paying women less than men for the same work and denying women chances to advance. The article went on to say that still today, women nationwide earn 79 cents for every \$1 earned by men, forty years after the Equal Pay Act was passed to address gender employment discrimination.

Now all of us, I assume, would agree that this is not faithful. But how did we get to this understanding? An argument can be made that other parts of scripture actually point to a more mutual and equal relationship between women and men –which is true. But who had the courage to even look for these verses and to interpret them in this way? It's my guess that the way things really started to change was when women began to trust and value their own experience as an authority – an authority to be considered even more valuable than the witness of scripture and tradition. How else could women, who were told by almost every place in society that they were less than men, begin to believe otherwise? The only way this happened was by women growing in their ability to trust the revelation of God's will directly to them – through listening to their own hearts, their own hunches, their own longings, their own intuition, their own consciences, and their own experiences.

Another example of why I believe experience is so important for Christian formation comes from remembering that for years and years the church taught that the world was flat. Church tradition, church teaching for years was that the world was flat and a person could get in a lot of trouble if they suggested anything otherwise.

One of my favorite quotes of late comes from the early Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan. The first team of people to successfully circumnavigate the globe was led by Ferdinand Magellan in the early 1500s. He once said, "The church says the earth is flat. But I know that it is round. For I have seen the shadow on the moon, and I have more faith in a shadow than the church." In this quote we can hear Magellan trusting both reason and personal experience more than tradition, in order to know the truth of God.

It seems to me that the passage from the gospel of Matthew also speaks to the importance of personal experience in order to know the truth of God in our midst and in order to take significant steps to grow in our faith. This passage of course is the famous one in which Jesus asks his disciples, "Who people say that I am," and then more directly, "But who do you say that I am?" In the gospel of Mark, this question is placed at the center of the story. It becomes the fulcrum upon which the entire gospel turns.

"Who do you say I am?"

There are many things we can take from this important passage of scripture, but one of them is the priority given to personal, first-hand experience for revelation. For although Jesus first asks his disciples, "Who do men say the son of man is?" he is most interested in their own opinions, not some else's. Peter, we're told, is the only one who says, "You are the Christ." And for this famous confession, Peter is praised by Jesus saying, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." Jesus praises Peter for trusting the authority of his own personal experience of revelation.

Now, Peter probably knew some scripture and this must have helped him come to his conclusion some. Scripture spoke about a Messiah that would someday arrive. Indeed the disciples and others were aware of their tradition too, enough so to know that the way Jesus acted reminded some of the great prophet Elijah from years and years ago. But scripture would have only helped Peter to a point. Similarly, tradition would have only helped Peter and the others answer Jesus' question - to a point.

While they knew the Messiah would come someday and that tradition said Elijah would be involved in some way, that was about it.

So Peter had to turn to more than scripture, more than tradition, and certainly more than the limits of reason to make his confession. How reasonable would it have been that the savior of the world, the long awaited Messiah, was standing right in front of him! He had to trust his instincts, his gut, his own inner voice, and his personal experience of the person before him, asking the question. When he did, he was able to make the daring confession upon which Jesus said the entire church would be built.

For all these reasons and more, I believe that you and I also need to continue to seek out ways we can grow in our own direct-experiences of faith. We need to be able to have experiences where we literally test out our faith and practice our discipleship, over and over again, in order to develop the inner spiritual resources necessary to continue to grow in our spiritual formation. It's very important to find ways to keep our experience of God in Christ real, personal, direct and fresh, not relying too heavily on the experience, or "expertise" of others.

This isn't an easy thing to do, especially in today's society. Specialized training is so esteemed in our culture that often we have come to trust only "professionals" to do the things that people with less formal training used to do often, on their own. This includes teaching, healing, advising, developing spirituality, and thinking theologically. One place we can observe this is in the area of raising children. More and more parents today can feel inadequately equipped for the demanding and challenging task of teaching children – about faith, sexuality or even basic human values. More and more, the burden of such teaching has been shifted to schools and churches. While schools and churches play a significant role in shaping values and principles, these institutions can't adequately substitute for the formative relationships found in every child's home.

Why do we often trust the "professional" rather than the wisdom of our own communities, the wisdom of the people around us, or our own abilities and instincts? The danger of lifting up the value of specialized training too much, is we may very well come to distrust our own experience as a valuable dimension of genuine learning.

I remember, not too long ago a member of our congregation was in the hospital. We have some of the best hospitals in the country, if not the world around here, containing some of the most highly trained, highly skilled people, which is a tremendous blessing. But I remember a member of our congregation being very ill for a few days and the adult child of this individual knew that their loved one wasn't right. Some tests were done, but the medical community within this hospital couldn't find anything specific. Now, they didn't know this patient well, certainly not as well as her own family members, so they simply wrote off her behavior to old age. But this one family member knew that something else was wrong and even suggested the hospital do a particular test. This family member visited each day and checked with the nurses to see if this test was done. At first, I believe, they said it was done, but didn't reveal anything. But after this family member persisted they did the test – either again or for the first time - and sure enough, the family member was right! She had diagnosed the problem – not the members of the medical team at the hospital. Now imagine how much more pain and discomfort the individual in the hospital would have had to bear, if their family member hadn't trusted their own experience, own instincts, own voice, but rather too easily bowed to the “wisdom” of the medical staff!

This isn't to say that we don't need health care professionals, of course we do. But this story also tells us that even their expertise is limited and that we shouldn't (and they shouldn't) undervalue the patient's own experience, or their loved one's when addressing the issue of healing. Often the patient themselves and those who love them the most, can know far more than the “professionals” in certain circumstances.

This truth applies to most areas of life. It applies here too. We can come on Sundays and listen to what the preacher has to say, or come to a study and only pay attention to what the pastor has to say and rely too heavily on this particular person's experience for our own spiritual journey. But if we do, we're limiting our ability to really grow in Christ. For revelation doesn't just come to the clergy, the designated leaders, but to everyone. Revelation comes direct to every single human being, without exception. All we need to do is seek it and trust it. All we have to do is put ourselves in the right places and work at developing the right attitude or posture before God - to receive it. God, who is the source of revelation, is accessible within each of us.

This is one of the basic tenants of Protestantism; the priesthood of all believers. What this means is that, as Protestants, we believe we're all priests. We can all have a direct experience of God. While at times it's certainly helpful, we don't have to have a clergy person, a studied person, a priest set apart to intercede on our behalf. The priesthood is the vocation of all believers.

This principle is based on the belief that direct, personal experience should be trusted, valued, and considered mightily in our on-going journey with God. There is something of the light of God within each of us. The more we tend to this light, the more it grows, and the more we are grounded in the truest form of authority, the authority of the Truth that comes from within. Amen.