

**Matthew 16:13-20**

What answer would you give to Jesus' question—"Who am I?" Wait...before answering, let's take note of how others answer it. When He walked on this earth, some believed Jesus to be a dead prophet who had come back to life: John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah. Ask a Muslim today and you will get the same answer—Jesus was a prophet. A Hindu would say that Jesus was a great teacher. A Jehovah Witness would respond that Jesus was a son of God—small "s" in "son," and not "the" but "a." But they don't go far enough—all these answers. Because what they really are saying is that Jesus was a liar...a deceiver...not someone you should trust with your eternal soul. They wouldn't say that to your face, but that's what they believe. Because in the Gospels, Jesus claims to be "the" Son of God. He claims to be the world's only Savior from sin and hell. He claims that He alone is the Way into eternal life. And so every answer that disagrees with Jesus is calling Him a liar. That's one reason why we cannot pray with pagans. We pray for them, but not with them. A Christian cannot share a platform in prayer with those who confess that Jesus is not the Savior, but the world's biggest liar.

And so you, dear baptized Christian—how would you answer Jesus' question: Who do you say I am? It must be answered. The question cannot be ignored. To be sure, there are those who try to ignore it, and they may succeed in this life—but they will be forced to give answer on Judgment Day. Better to answer now. And the only answer that is acceptable is the one given by Simon Peter: You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Is that your answer? That Jesus is your Lord...your Savior? That's what you said prior to our last hymn when we confessed the Christian Faith together. You answered correctly...with your lips. But what was your answer last week when a friend or co-worker spoke to you about God—about their idea of God? Did you give a clear confession of Christ? You realize, of course, that silence is an answer.

And what about your loved one who needs to be spoken to about Jesus Christ, because he or she needs to hear the message of God's love in Jesus Christ? Are you giving the answer to this person that you gave with the congregation a few minutes ago?

And please pray for your pastor as he works with many members of the congregation who answered Jesus' question correctly with their lips on their Confirmation Day, but are giving now a much different answer with their lives. Your pastor needs your support as he calls these lost souls back to Christ, so that Peter's answer—which is the answer of the Church to Jesus' question—may be the rock upon which their life is built.

And if we think about it, we all need help there, because not one of us gives that perfect answer clearly, day after day, with what we say and how we live. And that's why we can take comfort that after Peter gave his answer, Jesus gave to His Church the forgiveness of sins—the keys of the kingdom—which unlock heaven's door to sinners like you and me... sinners who so often give a wrong confession, or no confession at all.

Jesus said, "Whatever you loose on earth, shall have been loosed in heaven." And your sins, friend, have been loosed—removed—you have been unburdened from them. Not because I say so, but because this is what Jesus says. He commands His pastor to speak to you, the baptized, penitent people of God here in this place, the precious word of pardon—of sin forgiven. For this is His word to you.

A pastor stood in court beside a member of his congregation—an individual who had been “out with the boys,” and had too much to drink. As he was driving home on the rain-soaked streets and through the dense fog, he turned a corner and heard a sickening clash of metal and breaking glass. Two young people lay dead. They had been thrown from their motorcycle. He was charged with manslaughter and driving under the influence. He sat in court trembling after days of testimony. The judge was about to speak. It could mean years of prison, loss of job, and poverty for his family. The judge spoke: The test for drunkenness had not been properly done; the motorcycle had no proper lights; the jury was ordered to render a not guilty verdict. All that was ominous and foreboding was now gone. He was a free man. The court declared him “not guilty.” His family kissed him—they could go on with their life, all because he had been declared innocent.

Now maybe this story and the way it ended angers you, because you hurt over those young people who were killed. But know this—you and I are that man. His story is our story. We are the sinner who finds himself in the presence of God the Eternal Judge. Our conscience tells us that our sins are not one, but many—sins against God, other people, our family. We have no excuses. God opens His mouth to speak. Will we be condemned to eternal torment? Will He send some punishment now? “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of an angry God.” What will God’s judgment be upon us? The Judge speaks: Not guilty! No punishment. No eternal hell for us. Instead, peace and forgiveness, acceptance and eternal life in heaven. How? Why? Not because of some technicality, but because Jesus is who He claims to be. He is the world’s Savior. He took your sins and punishments to the cross. He has freed you from all condemnation.

And so, back to your answer to Jesus’ question. Who do you say He is? Everything hangs in the balance with the answer that is in your heart and on your lips. By the grace of God and through the power of His Word and Sacraments, you confess with the Church that Jesus is the One who died for you. You confess His saving name. This is not to your credit. It is because God, in His mercy, has revealed this to you.

Now when Jesus asks you, “Who am I?” He is not looking for information—He is looking for commitment. He seeks followers; He wants disciples—not for His sake, but for yours. You see, we cannot answer His question and then just walk away. Rather, He who came to be your Lord and Savior draws you to Himself. He brings you here to receive His Word of Forgiveness. He draws you to His Table to feed you His body and blood that you may have life in Him.

He goes with you out that door into your world as your constant source of strength, as your Defender and Helper. And He will allow you to confess His saving name, not just here with fellow members, but out there—by what you say to others and by how you live. And He keeps leading you back here to His Word and Sacraments to forgive you for all the times you fail to confess Him, and to strengthen your faith in Him.

And why does He do all this for you? Because Peter was right...Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God—who loves you and gave Himself for you. Amen.