

Matthew 16:13-20

In every school classroom there is always that student who has to answer every question. It can be very intimidating to all the other pupils. He, or she, shoots his hand up like a rocket as soon as the teacher asks a question, usually accompanied by grunting noises: "Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!" Other students may think they know the answer to the question, but how do you compete with Mr. Answer Man over there? The others usually just let him, or her, take center stage while they sit back in their chairs content to leave their hands down.

Simon Peter was such a student. He was always taking center stage. It's not that he was elected to be the spokesman for the Twelve. He just always spoke up first. I'm not even sure that he raised his hand when Jesus questioned His disciples. He simply blurts out the answer: "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!*" as soon as Jesus asks them, "*Who do you say that I am?*" But even Peter was not the first to blurt out the answer. Years before, Simeon held the Infant Jesus in his arms rejoicing that he had "*seen the Lord's Christ.*" The magi traveled far to give the same answer. Throughout the Gospels we encounter a number of men and women who give Peter's answer to Jesus' question.

So what makes Peter so special? Perhaps this...it's not just that Peter recognizes Jesus; Jesus recognizes Peter. "*You are the Christ,*" says Peter, and Jesus responds, "*You are Peter.*" Now maybe you're not so impressed. After all, doesn't God know everyone? Nothing is hidden from Him, so why wouldn't He know Peter's name, along with the names of everyone else?

But there is this...in His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that He will tell many on the Last Day, "*I never knew you; depart from Me...*" So it's a pretty big deal that Jesus calls Peter by name. And it's a pretty big deal that He calls you by name. For everyone will know Jesus on the Last Day. Even those who deny Him today will recognize that He is in truth the Son of the living God as He appears in glory with all His holy angels with Him.

But then it will be too late to answer Jesus' question, "*Who do you say that I am?*" Not even the most hardened atheist will give the wrong answer then. No, what will matter on the Last Day is not the question, "Do you know who Jesus is?" but the question, "Does Jesus know you?" "*Come, you who are blessed of My Father,*" Jesus will tell His sheep at that time because He knows them. "*I know My sheep,*" He says. But to the goats He will say, "*Depart from Me.*" The five wise virgins will be ushered into His presence we're told, but to the five foolish He will say, "*I do not know you.*"

So which one comes first, our knowing Jesus, or His knowing us? It seems that we know Him first. Didn't Peter first say, "*You are the Christ,*" and then Jesus responded with, "*You are Peter*"? But Jesus also tells Peter that his answer was revealed to him by the Heavenly Father. Peter would not have known Jesus had not God first known him in eternity, and in time, revealed to him who Jesus is and what Jesus means to him.

It's the same with you. In your baptism your Heavenly Father does for you what He did for Simon Peter. He reveals Jesus to you. He gives you faith to trust in Him, even though your little mouth back then could not even speak His name.

If you were to ask little Hadleigh, “Who do you say that Jesus is?” she might turn her eyes to look at you, but she would not say with her mouth, “He is the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And yet, know for certain that this is her answer within her heart. Before her baptism this morning it was not her answer. But it is now. “*I know My sheep,*” says Jesus, “*and they know Me.*” Hadleigh knows Jesus through faith worked in her heart by the Holy Spirit because Jesus first knew her. And Jesus doesn’t just know her as Hadleigh; He knows her as His sheep.

You see, Jesus gave Simon Peter a new name. He was called Simon from birth. But now Jesus calls him Peter. Peter, a rock; a rock because he confesses Christ. All of you have a name given from birth. And Jesus knows your name. But He also gives you a new name. He gives His name to you. “*You are the Christ,*” says Peter, and so He is. And in your baptism Jesus gives you His name--the name Christian, because there at the font He joins you to Himself, He comes to live within you. Children inherit their last name, their family name, from their father and mother when they are born. In baptism you were born into the family of Christ, and so Jesus now calls you His Christian.

We like to place adjectives in front of the name Christian. Good Christian. Faithful Christian. Church-going Christian. Mediocre Christian. Delinquent Christian. Jesus doesn’t do this. He knows you not because of how you live and behave; He knows you because you are His sheep.

Oh, He does speak of His wandering sheep, His sheep who become lost. Peter was such a Christian. Mr. Answer Man had no answer to give when he was questioned about Jesus in the court of Caiaphas. Rather than raising his hand to the sky and crying, “Oh! Oh! Yes, I know Jesus!” he kept his hand buried in his pocket. “Jesus? Never heard of Him,” he said three times.

How often have we denied Jesus either with our words or by our actions? Are we always quick to raise our hand and say, “Yes, I know Jesus!” “Yes, I love Jesus; let me tell you about Him!” Are we always quick to raise our hand and say, “Yes, I am a Christian!” “I am Jesus’ disciple; it’s why I worship here and serve Him here.” We keep our hands down more than we realize, and always let the Simon Peter’s among us do the work, the serving, the giving, even the worshipping.

Friend, Jesus did not keep His hand down for you. He raised His hand freely and eagerly when He was asked by His Father to come and be the Savior of sinners. Jesus raised His hands freely and eagerly when the soldiers nailed them to a cross for you. He did not keep His hands buried in His pockets. He did not deny your sin. He accepted it. He embraced your punishment. He died for you.

And you are forgiven. No matter if your hands have been raised in worship and service to God or not, He freely forgives you. No matter if you have denied your Lord who bought you, you have a merciful God who has declared you forgiven of all sin.

If you know Jesus in this way, it’s because He first knew you. He is not interested in knowing how bad you were last week. He is not interested in knowing all the ways you failed and messed up over the years. Jesus doesn’t know you as good or bad; He knows you as His precious sheep. He knows you with a heart of love. He knows you in mercy. This is a God worth knowing, and worth knowing well. This is your God because you are His sheep. Amen.