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Matthew 16:13-20

### PAYING ATTENTION TO 13a

Who cares about 13a--right? Our passage from Matthew today begins at verse 13 which reads, "Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'" That is all of verse 13. And if we had to say, the most important part of that sentence is the question Jesus asks his disciples: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" This is the second half of verse 13 so we would refer to that portion as verse 13b. But who among us stops to think about verse 13a. The first part of that sentence, verse 13a reads, "Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi . . ." Our tendency is to slide right past 13a on our way to something more interesting, like 13b.

But the gospel stories rarely include extraneous details. Usually, every detail in the gospels is there for a reason. And so 13a is not a detail we can ignore. Because it matters. *Where* Jesus asks his disciples this important question about who people say he is--and then later, who they, his disciples, say he is--where this question is asked matters.

13a tells us that Jesus and his disciples enter Caesarea Philippi. This is not just any town or city. This is a city named and built in honor of the Roman emperor Caesar. King Herod, and then later his son Philipp, built up this city with grand marble buildings, to honor and worship Caesar. In English, we might have called the place Caesarville. Caesar's town. The very name of the town identified it as a place where the might and power and wealth of Caesar was lauded, a place of political patronage and maneuverings and influence peddling.

It is here in Caesarville, that Jesus asks this important question: first, "who do people say that I am," and then more importantly to his disciples, "but who do *you* say that I am?" Here in

Caesarville this question takes on profound significance. Imagine the difference between asking someone this question in the middle of a corn field in Iowa or asking a person this question on the floor of the United States Senate. The setting matters.

It's a question loaded with significance. In asking this question in Caesarville, Jesus was directly confronting the worldly forces of power and the very forces that clamor for our devotion and allegiance. By walking into Caesarville and asking his followers to state who they understood him to be, Jesus was setting the church in a context of conflict.

When we think of the word "conflict" we may think about violence like we see on the news or angry words as we might experience in our family disputes. But conflict doesn't have to mean that. Conflict is really about opposing forces. We experience opposing forces all the time--both internally as well as externally. If we are on a diet, we may feel the tension of opposing forces when faced with a dessert buffet. We also experience opposing forces when faced with decisions about health care for the poor, minimum wage, and the regulation of carbon emissions. Opposing forces take place within us and around us. What will gain the upper hand? What forces will shape our lives, guide our lives, influence our lives?

Jesus sets the church in a context of conflict. He doesn't mean we engage in conflict by picking up weapons to kill or intimidate. He does mean, however, that the church, his followers, are to live our lives opposing the forces of Caesarville--the forces of might makes right, of greed and selfishness and cruelty, of coercion and intimidation, excess and undisciplined consumption, of revenge and hatred.

"Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks his followers standing smack dab in the middle of Caesarville. Because how we answer this question is essential to how we will live, the choices we make, the priorities we adopt. Who do you understand Jesus to be? In case you and I

are slow to figure out the answer, Peter steps in with the affirmation of faith that will serve to guide the Christian Church for the centuries to come: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus praises Peter and says, "Upon this rock I will build my church." Traditionally the Christian Church, in particular the Catholic Church, has taken Jesus' words to indicate that Peter is the individual who will build Christian Church, the first apostle. But I also wonder if Jesus' words are meant to indicate something bigger than just Peter. Maybe Jesus also means to indicate that Peter's affirmation "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," is the rock, the foundation of the Christian Church. This affirmation will guide us when we step into our own Caesarilles.

And we will. We need to pay attention to verse 13a because Caesarilles exist all around us. At any moment we may find ourselves standing smack dab in Caesarville and if we don't pay attention, we can overlook its pull and influence upon us. We can find Caesarville in government policies that enhance the power and wealth and position of the elite at the expense of the weak and poor. But we can also find Caesarville in the catalogs that pour into our mailboxes, the ads on TV, and the subtle influences of the culture of consumption. It may be that a conflict with a friend or colleague or family member will lead us into our own personal Caesarville, tempting us with the pathway of revenge or hatred or hardened hearts. The messages of the Empire--of domination, of entitlement, of wealth and status, of consumption, of revenge--are swirling all around us, and it takes very little to let them influence our hearts and minds, to pay them allegiance and offer our devotion.

But Jesus puts the Church in conflict with Caesarville. We are the people who not only declare that "Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God," but we are called to actively

oppose the forces of Caesarville. Jesus tells Peter, "on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." What it seems like from this passage is that the followers of Jesus are called to not only resist the forces of Hades, meaning death and evil and other powers of Caesar, but to actively oppose them. The followers of Jesus are those who storm the gates of death and destruction, cruelty and greed, and who liberate the captives of Hades. Jesus leads his followers to Caesarville to set them into vigorous opposition with all that Caesar stands for. We are the people who live out a different affirmation of power: that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Upon this rock I will build my church, Jesus says to us.

It is a sad truth that the church has not always lived out this affirmation. We can look back at the history of the Christian Church and see far too many instances of where the Church has instead become its own Caesarville--where it has embraced the values of Caesar rather than those of the Messiah, the Son of the living God. We can see in history a Church that has dominated and coerced, killed and tortured and excluded, pursued greed and wealth and fallen into corruption. As time passed and its political power waned, the Church became a place where people went to acquire social respectability. Today, the Church enjoys far weaker social power or status, but it is still thought of as a place where good people go to make themselves better.

But none of these manifestations represent the Church of Jesus Christ. Jesus called his followers, both as individuals and then us collectively, to live in ways that are frankly counter-cultural. In fact, he called us to be revolutionary. 13a leaves us no other conclusion. Jesus walks into Caesarville, into all those dominating forces of our hearts and minds and into those dominate forces in our society and world, and asks us to declare our loyalties. The followers of Jesus ground themselves in the affirmation that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. And in the name of the Messiah of love, in the name of the Messiah of justice, in the name of the

Messiah who cared for the vulnerable and the weak, in the name of the Messiah of generosity and service, in the name of the Messiah of forgiveness and second chances, in the name of the Messiah of hope, we are prepared for conflict.