St. Matthew's Lutheran Church & School – Oconomowoc, WI
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year A
Proper 16
Matthew 16:13-20
August 23, 2026

Sermon: Matthew 16:13-20
Who Do You Say Jesus Is?

It's that time of year when Pokémon and Princess Elsa backpacks are busting at the zippers with pencils, paper, protractors, and paperclips, oh my! You would think some of the students are in the World's Strongest Student competition as they waddle down the hallways with backpacks packed with all the essentials for a successful school year. The hallways are full of laughter and friends catching up on the highlights of the summer. You can sense the buzz of anticipation and eagerness as students find their places in their new classroom and new roles. Maybe it's the first year in kindergarten, or the first time in a classroom starting with a number, or after all those years you are the oldest students on campus in 8th grade, or a senior and now you get to see what it's like for others to look up to you and for you to set the example. A few months go by, perhaps even less than that and some of the anticipation and eagerness has worn off. There isn't quite the bounce in the step down the hallway at 7:20 a.m. like the first day of school and there certainly isn't when it comes to the teacher asking some tough questions, especially if you didn't study like was expected. I remember when I was in high school in English class the professor always chose people to diagram sentences on the board in front of the class. I would rather have gone to the dentist five days a week than be called on to diagram a sentence on the board. You avoided eye contact at all costs, slouched in the seat, and did everything physically possible to not get called on to diagram subject, verb, preposition, object of the preposition, direct object and indirect object, and so on. No one wanted to get called on to give the answers for that. You tried to hide and avoid if at all possible.

Jesus had a question for his disciples. It's pop quiz time for them, but the spotlight isn't directed at them yet. "Who do people say the Son of Man is? Jesus is asking what do people say about me? Who do they think I am? The answers given to the quiz are quite illustrious. Some thought that Jesus was John the Baptist. This would mean that he would be the resurrected John the Baptist, the second coming of John because Herod already put John to death. That is quite a statement. It's in line with what people witnessed from Jesus. They brought their sick, diseased, and dying to Jesus. The doctors had no answers. They had no hope of recovery or healing. They heard the reports from the ten leapers that had the death sentence disease and by a simple command they had life. They heard what happened at Nain as the widow grieved the death of her only son and suddenly there was no reason to grieve because Jesus brought him to life. But there was confusion about who he really was and what he was. Maybe he was John back from the dead. Another answer to the quiz from Jesus was that people thought he was the prophet Elijah. This would fulfill the prophecy from Micah that said Elijah would come again. Again, no slouch of a suggestion. Elijah was regarded as one of the greatest prophets of Israel. He's on the prophet podium with Moses. The crowds showed up wherever Jesus went. The clouds of dust from trampling feet announced his presence before people could see it was Jesus in the distance. The commotion commanded attention. Maybe he was another great prophet. People paid attention. They were willing to put Jesus up there with the greats in Israelite history. They certainly gave Jesus respect. They were willing to say that he was worth some attention. These were high ranking answers the disciples observed from people.

Who do people say Jesus is today? Just like in Jesus' day the same holds true today; you can't ignore Jesus. Jesus' enemies could not ignore him. It was precisely because of who he was and what he came to do that drove their obsessive hatred and opposition of him and they would stop at nothing to get rid of him. Jesus can't be ignored. So, if he can't be ignored, what do people do with Jesus? What do they say about Jesus? Jesus was a great miracle worker that showed compassion and love to the downtrodden and oppressed? We already mentioned some of the miracles he did and when a person takes their first steps as adult or sees the colors of creation for the first time or drove out demons that chains couldn't even control it got people's attention. Maybe Jesus was a contrarian trend setter against the Roman government? The crowds in his day were thirsting for that.

Jesus was a great teacher and influencer both then and now? More people follow Jesus in history even before you could click a button to do so. A survey asked the question, "Do you agree or disagree: Jesus is a great teacher, but not God." 52% of Americans agree with that statement. Teacher? Yes. God? Not so much says the majority. Maybe Jesus was a good moralist that we need to live by his example? He taught many moral teachings and told us to love one another. There are all kinds of answers to the question, who do people say Jesus is?

Today there is no hiding. There's no slouching in the seat hoping that the Almighty and Omnipotent doesn't notice you. Jesus has pinpoint focus on the answer he really wanted to get at with his disciples and us, *"But what about you? Who do you say I am?" (Matthew 16:15).* Peter steps up into the role he often assumes and speaks up and answers. *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."(Matthew 16:16).* What a statement this was! Peter declares that Jesus is the Chosen One, the Anointed One to do the work of the Messiah. The one identified from the Old Testament, the one that all of history and eternity is waiting for. The One that is the fulfillment of all the promises. That one is standing before them in the flesh and blood. The Son of the living God. The God that death cannot hold. The God that is not bound by stone, wood, and metal like the idols of the other nations surrounding Israel throughout history. The God to whom his people cry for mercy and he hears them. He is the fulfillment of all hope. The peace between a holy righteous God and sinful mankind is standing before them in the person, Jesus Christ. What a confession from Peter!

What about you? **Who do you say Jesus is?** Jesus puts us on the spot. He calls on you to give an answer. What is your confession? Of course, we want to echo the statement that Peter said. He is the Christ, the Son of the living God. All good stuff! That is what we want to confess. But then we are tempted with where the rubber meets to road. Jesus, it's great you are the Savior, but also show yourself to be practical in my life too. When I sprain my ankle on the pitfalls of life you better be there to do your miracle work and fix it yesterday and take away the pain. When I face the opposition in this life from those that have no use for you outside of being a great teacher or influencer maybe it's best if I slouch in the chair in life and don't make eye contact with anyone and don't speak up too loudly about. So, I am willing to agree with them up to a point, but I don't want to be pushed beyond that. I hope that's ok with you Jesus. When we see the challenges Christians face in this world are we sure that Satan won't overcome it and win? Because it looks like he is if you've been keeping score. Would it shock you that 30% of those that label themselves as "Evangelical Christians" also agree with that statement: Jesus is a great teacher, but not God? You might be shocked, but Satan smiles.

What about you? **Who do you say Jesus is?** You are going to make a statement that is the answer to that question in just a few minutes. Have you ever wondered why we put so much emphasis on the creeds? Why do we say either the Apostles or Nicene creeds in almost every service. We can almost say them in our sleep? Why do we need to keep on doing it? Why do you keep telling your spouse that you love them? You did it once on your wedding day. **Who do you say Jesus is?** Do we answer quietly hoping the world doesn't hear us, wishing it won't get Satan's attention? One of the ways we answer that question is when we come together and confess boldly, "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty…We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God…We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life." We confess the living God. We confess who Jesus is and what he has done. The two are inseparable. You cannot say Jesus was just a miracle worker, great teacher, or a good example for us to live by. The Bible doesn't say that. The Bible says he is the Christ, the Son of the living God. He is the Savior from sin. He is the Son of God that took on flesh and blood to suffer, die, and rise. He is the one that has restored the relationship between sinners and God. He is the Savior that brings peace between God and mankind because of what he has done for us.

Who do you say Jesus is? He is the Christ, the Son of the living God. It is on this confession that the church stands and not even the gates of hell itself can overcome it. We confess it. We live it. Boldly, passionately because nothing can overcome it. Amen.