



“Peter’s Confession”

Matthew 16:13-28; Luke 14:25-33

***Peter declares the truth, the whole truth,
and nothing but the truth.***

If this week’s study looks like last week’s study it is because I took last week’s portion on Peter’s acknowledgement that Jesus is Messiah, added a bit more on the cost of discipleship and...presto...this week’s study. So—on to Peter’s Confession, as it is typically called.

Who is Jesus?

Today’s Scripture passage is the central scene in an extended narrative in Matthew’s Gospel (13:53–17:27). Amidst significant opposition from those who are blind to his mission, Jesus works to form a new community of God’s people. This community will be comprised of those who respond to the Good News and embrace Jesus’ new way of being the people of God.

After confronting Pharisees and Sadducees who had come to test him, Jesus, with his disciples, retreated to the region of Caesarea Philippi, about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. There, Jesus asks the disciples who people think he is. Clearly, the populace has a very high opinion of Jesus. Some think he is John the Baptist, who had announced the coming of the Messiah. Others think Jesus is Elijah, the great prophet of Israel (1 Kings 17–2 Kings 2), for Elijah had not died, but had ascended to heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:9-12) and was expected to return to usher in God’s kingdom (Malachi 4:5). Still others among the Galileans think Jesus is Jeremiah, another of Israel’s great prophets, who had pronounced judgment on Israel and Solomon’s Temple at the time of the temple’s destruction in 587BC. Though the people held Jesus in high esteem, they did not see Jesus as the Anointed One, God’s Messiah -- the returning king who would usher in the kingdom of God.

Peter’s confession

Though the populace does not yet grasp Jesus’ true identity, in Matthew’s Gospel at least, the disciples are beginning to see. Sometime earlier, the disciples had seen Jesus walk on water in the midst of a storm, provoking them to worship Jesus and say, “Truly you are the Son of God” (Matthew 14:22-36). But now, in a peaceful setting, Jesus asks his disciples directly “Who do you say that I am?” Perhaps speaking for them all or perhaps speaking only for himself, Simon Peter states his belief—his confession—that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. Jesus responds by blessing Simon, proclaiming that his confession, his understanding that Jesus is the Messiah, is the work of God, who has revealed this to Simon. But...has God revealed everything about Jesus and his vocation to Simon? Evidently not, for not long after this, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must suffer. Peter didn’t understand this or didn’t what to. Jesus rebuked Simon Peter for being a “stumbling block,” even calling him “Satan” (Matthew 16:21-23).

Jesus’ promise

After blessing Simon, Jesus tells him, “...you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church...” This verse has proved to be one of the most controversial in the New Testament. Does Jesus mean that Peter himself is the rock on whom the church will be built? Or does “this” refer to Peter’s confession, his belief that Jesus is the Messiah? Because the Roman Catholic Church has always used this verse to support the papacy, Protestants have tended to prefer the latter understanding. Perhaps a better approach is to understand that it is the *confessing Peter* on whom Jesus will build his church.

Certainly, in the gospels, Peter played the primary role among the disciples. In addition, he was the early leader of the Christian community in Jerusalem and Judea. On the day of Pentecost, it was Peter who rose to deliver the first great speech of the young church (Acts 2). But Jesus has more in mind than just Peter the man. It is the believing Peter around whom Jesus will form his new community, his church (*ekklesia* in the Greek).

This imagery of foundations and churches is used by many of the New Testament writers. Paul reminds us that it is Jesus Christ who is the foundation (1 Cor 3:11). For the writer of Ephesians, Jesus is the cornerstone of God's household which is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (2:20).

We needn't be troubled by these varied metaphors. Jesus is Lord and all things must point to him. His church is comprised of people who confess that Jesus is Lord and Messiah, who carry on God's work of renewing and restoring all humanity and creation. Jesus promised Peter and the other disciples that even the "gates of Hades" would not prevail against his church. Hades is the place of the dead, not a place of punishment – these are the "gates of death" (Isaiah 38:10; Job 38:17). Death, having come through sin (Gen. 3:3), symbolizes the powers of evil. Jesus promises that even though we battle evil every day and in many forms, his church will endure and will never be conquered. These are words of great comfort and profound encouragement.

But...more than Peter bargained for??

After Peter had been rebuked for denying the suffering and death of the Messiah, Jesus had told the disciples clearly about the cost of their discipleship, Peter knew he wanted a messiah; he was simply not getting the sort of messiah he wanted. But there is more, as explained by Donald English. There is some deep truth here and I urge you to read through it several times:

Lest this should not be enough shock for one day [Yes, the Messiah must suffer and die], Jesus now adds another, this time for the crowd as well as the disciples (Mark 8:34–9:11). Not only must he go this way of death; so too must anyone who would be a disciple of his. As C. F. D. Moule points out, Jesus is not using crossbearing to describe the human experience of carrying some burden through life. It is much more comprehensive than that. 'People carrying crosses were people going to execution.' Cross-bearing as a follower of Jesus means nothing less than giving one's whole life over to following him. And here comes another surprise. This is the way of total freedom. If you clutch your life wholly to yourself, protecting it against all others, asserting all your rights, needs and privileges, you lose it because it isn't life any longer. If, however, you acknowledge that life is not yours by right, that all is

The Cost of Discipleship

By Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis in April 1945 for his part in an attempt on Hitler's life. The Cost of Discipleship (1937) is his most well-known book. Had Bonhoeffer been in the crowd on the day that Jesus turned and confronted his disciples, he would have understood Jesus' talk of crosses. Listen to these words, written as the Nazi darkness fell across Germany:

"Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves . . . Grace without price, grace without cost! The essence of grace, we suppose, is that the account has been paid in advance; and, because it has been paid, everything can be had for nothing...Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline...Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate..."

"Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field...it is the pearl of great price...it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his net and follows him...Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock...it is costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life...Above all, it is costly because it cost God the life of his Son...Above all, it is grace because God did not reckon his Son too dear a price to pay for our life."

privilege, and that it is to be lived in the love that the gospel story reveals, self-giving love, then you possess it wholly. There is now nothing to lose and everything to gain (35). Supposing you gain all the world's riches, and lose the inner freedom of loving and being loved by God—what then? (36). What will you give in exchange for that divinely given inwardness, which is the center of all that is spiritual, the aspect of everything you are, where God wishes to dwell? These are the choices now being offered by Jesus, Messiah, Son of Man. The apparently gloomy news of the cross is actually the way to total freedom and fulfillment.¹

Jesus tells two parables about the cost of discipleship

At a later time, Jesus pulls no punches with the crowds (see the above passage from Luke 14). They may be caught up in the excitement of Jesus' journey, but they too better understand the cost of discipleship: there can be no higher priority than Jesus. If Mom calls and says to give up the journey and come home, Jesus warns that you better be prepared to hang up the phone. Jesus comes before mother...or father...or siblings...or even life itself. Jesus' talk of "hate" is not about malice or hostility toward our parents nor is it about self-loathing. It is about being willing to turn away from anyone or anything that would pull us away from Jesus. But there is more.

For you and me, Jesus' talk about carrying a cross (v. 27) is a figure of speech. For anyone in the crowd that day, the cross was a stark reality. Some in the crowds would have been old enough to remember thirty years before when the Romans had crucified thousands of Galilean Jews. The rest would have been told the story. The horror of crucifixion was a very real possibility for anyone who continued on with Jesus. You and I may not face death as a consequence of our faith in Christ, though some Christians still do. For us, the question is whether we can even recognize that there is a cost to our discipleship. If we believe there is no cost, then we are not hearing Jesus. As he said, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen" (Luke 14:35)

Fools at work and at war²

Jesus was such a great teacher. So often, he would make his point by telling a story and usually a brief story at that. Jesus didn't use parables because he wanted to obscure his message from his followers but because he wanted to illuminate his message. We can participate in Jesus' stories in a way that we could never participate in a saying or some sort of theological explanation.

After confronting the crowd with the cost of discipleship, Jesus tells two brief parables to illustrate a simple point: only fools would start a project without being pretty sure they could finish it. None of us would build a new house without understanding the costs and doing all we could to ensure that we could finish the job. Similarly, using a military analogy, Jesus notes that no wise king would wage war without the prospect of victory.

But could we ever be sure that we can pay the cost of discipleship? No, of course not. Peter would deny Jesus three times. But still, our call to discipleship is to be all consuming. This can be no half-hearted commitment. No part of our lives can be excluded from this commitment, including our wallets and relationships and, as Jesus pointedly notes, our possessions (v. 33).³ I sometimes hear people (including myself!) use the term "committed Christian." I guess I know what we mean, but it is deeply regrettable that we feel the need to say it. "Committed Christian" ought to be a redundancy. Let us pray that it is so with each of us.

¹ Donald English, *The Message of Mark: The Mystery of Faith*, The Bible Speaks Today, (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 161.

² from Alan Culpepper's commentary on Luke in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, Abingdon, 1995. Dr. Culpepper's observations on this passage were a big help in the preparation of this study

³ The Greek verb translated "give up" literally means "to say farewell to," as in waving goodbye!