

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
The Second Sunday After the Epiphany  
18 January 2015

Scripture readings:

I Samuel 3:1-20

Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17

I Corinthians 6:12-20

John 1:43-51

Today is the Second Sunday after the Epiphany of our Lord, and if you pay attention to things like the Church Calendar you might say, "Oh, now wait a minute. It's the 18<sup>th</sup> of January and we all know that the 18<sup>th</sup> of January is....." Aren't you all fussed that the 18<sup>th</sup> of January is the Confession of St. Peter? [laughter] Those who deal with the calendars of the Church and the cycle of celebrations - when those kinds of things occur on Sunday, they get bumped to Monday because the Church is scrupulous about maintaining Sunday as a celebration of the Savior and a celebration of Easter. So none of the other theological and calendrical (Is that a word?) concerns prevail over Sunday and the Church Calendar seasons. You know how this happens in Lent. When Epiphany is over we count the forty days of Lent. There are way more than forty days in Lent, probably forty-six or so, because we don't count Sundays. Sundays are Easter celebrations, and we're not celebrating Easter in Lent.

I think it's worth paying attention to the Gospel that would have been read today on the 18<sup>th</sup> of January, 2015, from Matthew 16 because it's got an important question that I think we ought to think about.

*When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets." And he said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter - (You all know about Simon Peter, don't you. They probably cleaned up his language) - Simon Peter said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you - (and now Jesus is punning on the name of Peter which is Petros. You know what petroleum is - rock oil. Petros is the Greek word for rock.) You, Peter, are the rock on which I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

Well, there's lots more that we're going to talk about today. However, I want to ask the question that Jesus asked of Peter, and I want to keep that question alive for us today and for all of our life together. Who is it you say that Jesus is? And if you look at this text carefully, Jesus doesn't say to Peter, "You're right." Jesus says to Peter, "Well, that's an inspired answer." Who do we say that Jesus is? And *how* do we say who Jesus is?

It happens occasionally and it happened only maybe a week or two ago when a parishioner on exiting the church, asked me, "Why do we have to use the Nicene Creed?" Well, it's an extraordinary question and it's a good question. As you know, you will not find the Nicene Creed in scripture. The Nicene Creed comes from the first quarter of the fourth century, 325, when the Fathers of the Church - (there's a significant deletion there already) - get together to decide what it is the Church really believes about God. If you look at the creeds, what we think about God the Father is easy - one sentence: "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." Boom, that's easy. "And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, forgiveness of sins" - easy! But what the guts of the creed is about is what do we think about Jesus? And it's a complicated business. Well, he's man. And then we get all of these heresies - and that sounds like a dirty word, heresy. But heresy just means a choice. These are ideas, choices to think about God in ways other than the Church established as the proper way. So we get all of these heresies being treated in the middle of the creed trying to clean up what everybody thinks about who Jesus is. Well, he's God but he's man but he's not just like every other man. He's like us in all things but sin, and he's really fully God but if he's God, God can't suffer so Jesus doesn't feel pain...oh yes, he does! There's extraordinary history of heresies in the life of the Church with those on the right side telling those on the wrong side why their thinking is wrong and why our thinking is right. It is laughable and it leads to us in our ecclesiastical institutions

sometimes taking very untenable positions - the most untenable one being that we are right and we have the answer, we know what to believe and we know who is wrong which is even more important and we know, then, who to kick out, who to condemn, who to send to hell, who not to like, who not to have communion with, who not to worship with. We know all the things that are wrong about everybody else.

Well, it is an extraordinary question and one that I don't think we should avoid asking even though the celebration has been bumped to tomorrow. And my question of you is, "*Who is it we say Jesus is and how is it the world will know who it is we say Jesus is?*" In 325 one of the ways was to write a creed. You gather all of the *cognoscente*, all of those who know everything about the Church, all of the powerful, all of the leaders - all of them men - to sit down and tell everybody else who doesn't know anything about God and particularly about Jesus. Well, that has its place, I suppose, in history. We don't have to be guilty about that. But you can see why a faithful, devoted person today would ask a priest on the way out of the church, "*Why do we say that every week?*" You might want to know what my answer was. I said, "*That's what the Episcopalians do.*" [laughter] Presbyterians get away with it and Lutherans do it, too. It's a fair enough question, but let's keep it there because it gives us something to talk about. It gives us something to compare what's going on in our lives with what has happened in the life of the Church that many hundreds and thousands of years ago, and it gives us reason to think about what others have said, how that has sorted out over the years, and it should give us the nerve, or maybe the better word is the grace, and the courage to continue to think about what is it we think about Jesus. Who do we say he really is? Or was? And my question - not that I have better questions than Jesus but just different ones - *how* do we say what we believe or who we believe Jesus was? Now that's where the dog lies buried.

So we come to today's lections about Jesus and his encounter with Nathanael and Nathanael's proclamation of who Jesus is. "*How did you get to know me.*" "*I saw you underneath the fig tree before Philip called you.*" And Nathanael answered, "*Oh, you are the Son of God. You are the King of Israel. You can see clearly.*"

That's an old tradition. We have this wonderful text from I Samuel about Samuel learning to see, Samuel learning to believe in the voice of God, and Samuel being given a prophecy, a *hard* prophecy of truth which he has to take to his mentor, his elder, his beloved Eli and give him this message that he's messed up and it's not going to last if he continues to do it that way. And how do we, then, carry and say to the organizations inside of which we live... How many organizations do we have inside of us? Figure a few. We could start with the church. Don't forget the Lions and the Rotary, Daughters of the King, the nation, the state, our villages and towns, our school communities, the communities and organizations in which we work and make our gainful employment. There are zillions of organizations inside which we live and in all of these, it seems to me, we are equipped with the ability to say who it is we believe Jesus is. And I don't mean to tell you to go to work with your Bible and beat somebody over the head with another creed. But how does the person in the workplace, in society, in our relationships with each other, who encounters us and knows us to be a Christian - how does that person come to see Jesus in how we interpret that in our lives? Who is it we really say we believe Jesus is and what will be found out and understood by anybody who deals with us honestly? And there are loads of people who share ideas with us about Jesus who call themselves Christians and with whom I disagree profoundly because their Christianity preaches hate of some kind, someone, something or anyone different. And that's a part of the system because the systems of orthodoxy invite us to believe that we know what's right and therefore have to preach against what is wrong.

I suppose a better use of our energy is to live out what it is that is becoming clear to us, not that which has become clear to someone else, and to engage in the business of coming to know who Jesus is and living in relationship with our concept of Jesus who shares with us this extraordinary message that was shared with him at his baptism about which we read last week. At his baptism - of course this is the theological fun with baptism: Well, if Jesus was sinless, why did he need to be baptized? Maybe it wasn't a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. Maybe baptism was simply the proclamation of God's love for him. Could it be that in our baptisms in every church in Christendom, despite what we say theologically, God is somehow trying to use a sacrament, a celebration, a dribbling of water, a hangover from thousands of years even before Christ, that there is a declaration to every human being, no

matter how small, incapable or unable to do anything but mess a diaper, eat and demand for himself or herself - the proclamation that God loves this individual person, period. Skip the sin business, skip the enemy business. God says in baptism the same thing that God said to Jesus, "*You are my beloved daughter. You are my beloved son. I am pleased with you.*"

Now it may take a lifetime for us to grasp what that means, and it certainly takes at least a moment of self-reflective candor to admit that the limited human existence which I occupy bounded by all of the limits of time and space is not worthy of eternal attention or divine affection. Could we agree on that? That we are like the insects on the sidewalk which we walk on as we go by in comparison to the Almighty, to the Creator of heaven and earth. We can't even create our own happiness. And then we have this extraordinary confession from and through Jesus that God loves him and God loves me!

Who do you say that I am? Well, they wanted to make him king over Israel; they wanted to give him power. All that Jesus is standing there saying is, "*I believe that God loves me.*" And the only thing that Jesus wants to share with anybody else is that belief that you also are as fully, completely, unconditionally, eternally, and divinely loved by the same God in the same way. So do we need to worry about making Jesus divine or worry about keeping him human? Could we just take the message for God's sake and our own? Could we just believe that? And then in believing that, could we allow that to affect how it is we relate to each other inside of all of those organizations in which we live and operate and let others see that we really believe that, and my guess is they will know what we think Jesus is and who we think Jesus is by how we operate in our lives with each other personally, corporately, as a nation, and, perhaps most uniquely and interestingly, as a church. It's one of the things I find most fascinating about the pope at the moment. He is asking an organization which has had great stock in being always right, *always right*, to re-think itself in terms of how he in his office relates to the world - not just to the Curia, not just to the hierarchy, but to all of those poor people in the Philippines and Sri Lanka and New York City and wherever else he goes, that he *gets*, I believe, in our day what Jesus got in his day because in the Philippines he was talking about the family and he talked about his own family. When have you ever heard a pope talk about his parents? That means they had toilets. *[laughter]* They were people. They went to bed, they got up, they lived, they breathed, they ate, and they loved each other, and he just feels that was so important to his life and has encouraged all who he was talking to to consider the value of what the affirmation of a family circle means in terms of our development as human beings.

And so here is this question that Jesus is asking of Peter: "*Who do you say that I am?*" Peter has this high-faluting idea of Jesus which Jesus does not contradict. I mean I'm sure we in our humility would say, "*Oh, go on. You're kidding.*" The Messiah, the Son of the living God. Are you ready to be called the Messiah, the Savior, the daughter or son of the living God if you communicate the same message to the world that Jesus did? Is that a possibility? That if you can own the fact that God loves you fully - now we're talking about eternity, the Creator of the world, the owner of the whole shootin' match - loves you fully despite your flaws, and we all know your flaws better than you do. *[laughter]* We're good at that, right? And I think that's what Francis is trying to get at with the organizational Church. We are able to make the confession that we do not deserve this kind of affection or attention from the Almighty God but have it. Now that negates most of the objective work of the Church which is the business of trying to save us and make sure we get into heaven - pay the right price, do the right thing, believe the right thing, say the right thing about Jesus... All of that work is negated. Do you believe you are loved by God fully, completely, sufficiently? And let me tell you this, friends, - I know you as well as I know myself - it will take the love of God to do that. But in receiving that, can we allow that to liberate us into the business of sharing that love with others in our lives and inside of all of those organizations and structures in which we live, work, breathe, and have our being and incomes and all the rest of it.

Bishop Sheen was on in color this morning. He was really upset about communist Russia and Khrushchev and all the rest of it. But I missed from his mouth what it is he might have thought the message of the Gospel might mean in terms of the frozen-over business of the Cold War at that time. Let us ask that question. What does it mean in terms of being fully loved by God who fully loves everyone else in the world when we as a nation draw a very, very

unreal willy-nilly line along the Rio Grande and say, “*This side is ours. That side is yours. You stay there and you may not come in here*” to the people who inhabited this land, Americans, Mexicans, Americans - inhabited this country before our ancestors got here. Now that sounds political. You’re entitled to your political position but that’s not the point. The point is how do we as Christian people when we think politically apply the Divine love, affection and full integrity of God’s love for all people to those kinds of situations? What is it we have that hasn’t been God’s gift to us? And how is it we feel entitled to possess that which is a gift rather than share it? And that doesn’t mean that happens without complication. It doesn’t mean it happens without difference of opinion. But how do we in our own minds as believing people over whom the heavens have opened and open every day with the message, “*You are my beloved child. I love you fully*” - how can we look at somebody else and say, “*You don’t deserve that love*”? And then how does that person perceive what we believe about God when they deal with us? *That’s* the point. Who do you say that I am, and how do you say it? I firmly believe that there is more than one construct that’s probably valid, but as Christian people can we accept that the message of the Gospel has nothing to do with what we believe about Jesus as much as it does do we believe what Jesus said. There’s a difference. Do we believe what was said about Jesus - that the heavens opened above him and God said, “*You are my beloved child.*” We call that an epiphany, the sight of God. Do we believe that with every other human being in the world exists the possibility of an epiphany - that we can see in everyone else in the world, as I look at each of you and know that there God has opened the heavens somehow by Grace and said, “*This is my child. I am pleased with this person*” and invites us into a relationship that belies the love that we believe. Peter made a confession. The Church made a confession. We call it the Nicene Creed. And I submit to you, friends, whether or not you do it that systematically, however we live our lives we make a confession, like it or not, and we take the name Christian or Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Methodist or even Lutheran to take the name of Christ and say we believe in Christ and then de-value anybody else in the world in any other way. How? And so we are given, friends, a very, very hard message. And it’s hard for ourselves for starters. We have this extraordinarily beautiful example of Samuel this morning. He doesn’t hear God. He thinks it’s Eli calling. Doesn’t hear God. He thinks it’s Eli calling. Doesn’t hear God ... Eli, by the way, is growing older. He’s getting blind. The light is going out. He’s not seeing very clearly anymore. Eli is getting deaf. God’s not getting through to Eli. Eli is aging, his religion is dying, the lamps are burning out in the Temple, he’s failed. And Samuel hears the word of God and has to go to this man whom I assume he admires and loves with a prophecy that is not a pleasant one but it’s true. And so sometimes we have to hear a prophecy ourselves which isn’t pleasant but must be true or should be true or if it is true ought to inform us in our faith and in our life together. And it’s not a matter of banging each other over the head with the truth. That will go nowhere. It is a matter of falling in love with each other as people whom God has fallen in love with and believing that God lives in us as we gather in God’s name. That’s why we do the sacrament every week, proclaiming that Christ is present with us in, with and under bread and wine, not because it’s magic, but because we have gathered and perceive God present with us and God uses all of us to encourage, support and strengthen each other to bear the message that Samuel received that may not be a pleasant one but it’s a true one and it’s a healthy, good, and wholesome one for ourselves first and for the world. It means, friends, that our *weltanschauung* - that’s a German word for world view - that as Christians we are faced with the reality that Christ changes our world view and that’s the whole business of Peter’s confession. Peter starts to see things differently from the Church of his day.

Fulton Sheen was hysterical about Peter this morning. He said Peter was just a dumb fisherman. He got out his sword when they came in the garden to arrest Jesus. What does a fisherman know? He had his sword. He was supposed to cut the guy’s throat, and all he got was his ear cut off. *[laughter]* But the point of it is our confession along with Peter’s is a confession that our world view has not just changed but is always in the process of changing. There is nothing about us that is static, that stays, that doesn’t change, that is correct and is always correct and immutable. There is no infallibility among us except the infallible love of the Almighty God, and that changes our world view every day and invites us into relationships with those we normally would exclude or ignore or de-value in ways that we have yet to find out. *[An “Amen” from the congregation]* That’s good enough. If Hugh says “*Amen*” I’m done.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now you all know how to shorten a sermon. *[laughter]*