



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

So we are really just about at the midway point of Matthew's gospel today. And if you've been potentially noticing these kinds of details, Jesus has been leading the disciples further and further out into the non-Jewish regions outside of Galilee. Last week they had ventured into Tyre and Sidon where they encountered the Canaanite mother who famously challenged the disciples about whether the gospel was only for the Jews. This week, Jesus leads them into Caesarea Philippi, which is even further out into Gentile territory.

And all this geography matters because Caesarea Philippi is no ordinary town. It was known as being something of a hotbed of pagan gods, fertility cults, and idol worship. The city was originally dedicated to the Greek God, Pan, the half human, half goat, god of sexuality and fertility, among other things. And he had a famous shrine there, where animals and even humans were sacrificed. And all manner of sexual and erotic rituals took place. I'm glad the kids are out.

In other words, Jesus taking the disciples, you know, this group of good Jewish boys, to Caesarea Philippi is a bit like Pope Francis leading a group of Benedictine nuns for a stroll down the Las Vegas Strip at about 2:00 AM. And I'm not talking about the new area of Vegas, I'm talking about the old Strip, right? The area where the stuff that needs to stay in Vegas really should stay there.

It reminds me a bit of a time back in college when me and a couple fraternity buddies, we spent the summer driving around the country, looking for one adventure after another, because that's what you do in college, right? Especially when you have your dad's credit card. And we decided to stop at the Republican National Convention, of all things, in New Orleans. And that night we found ourselves down in the French Quarter. And if you've ever been there at a busy convention time, particularly down on the north end, Mardi Gras never seems to really stop.

So we're wandering around the craziness, and along comes this group of Pat Robertson delegates. Now, for those of you who don't know, Pat Robertson was an evangelical preacher who ran for president at one point. And a bunch of his delegates come walking down the street in the midst of all this and they are literally holding on to each other for dear life. Because they are seeing people doing things in the streets that I'm going to guess they probably never really imagined could happen.

All right, so I'm exaggerating maybe a little, but are you getting the picture here? Jesus taking them to Caesarea Philippi, so far outside of their comfort zone where they are surrounded by false idols and false gods and who knows what else. He takes them there to finally have the conversation about who He is. And notice He begins by first asking, what do others say? Which I think makes sense if you think about it, because don't we all start there? Weren't we all introduced to Jesus by someone else? By our parents, our godparents, a grandparent, a Sunday school teacher, the prayers we were taught as kids.

We were all told at some point who Jesus was by someone. And so our answer to the question, who is Jesus, quite naturally begins with what we've heard from others. It's the thing we repeat when we're asked, maybe a line from the creed, maybe it's a favorite hymn, a rote phrase that we've heard repeated again and again, like, Jesus is the Son of God who died for my sins. We all have to start somewhere. But as Jesus reminds us today, what others say about Jesus, it may indeed be our starting point. But it's not where we want to end. At some point, we need to leave the answers of others behind and begin to form our own relationship, our own intimacy with who Jesus is in our life.

And so with that warm-up question out of the way, Jesus gets to the real one. Who do you say I am? I remember being asked that very question not soon after finishing seminary. I had just passed the general ordination exam, which is like a two-day test. It's basically the bar exam for clergy. And my bishop at the time says, great. Oh, and by the way, one more thing. We need you all to sit for a one day, all day oral exam in front of me and a committee of fellow clergy. And he's like, come on, Chris, why the long face? It's going to be fun.

Well, we got through it. And it was a bit of a blur, to be honest, until we got to the end. And the bishop said, Okay, Chris, one more question. Who is Jesus to you? And without thinking, I began to rattle off the standard orthodoxies. And my answers kept getting longer and longer as I tried to cover all my theological bases. And at some point, he cuts me off and he says, yes, yes, very good, thank you. But my question wasn't what others say. It's who do you say He is? Basically, it was this gospel playing out in front of me.

And so I answered once more, this time from my heart, and while I really don't remember my answer, it was enough to trigger one of the examiners who started to push back on me and say, what about this, that, and that? Which then triggered one of the other examiners to push back on his pushback. And the next thing you know, this panel is having an argument amongst themselves about who Jesus is. And I'm looking at the bishop who has this kind of Cheshire Cat grin on his face as if this was all how he had it planned. He really wasn't looking for a particular answer. He wanted to see us wrestle with the question.

Shirley Green, at our Thursday Bible study this past week, which I highly recommend, details in the Communicant. But Shirley nailed it this week. She said, look, we're all going to answer it differently. We're all going to answer it differently at different times in our life. Like any relationship, it will evolve and it will grow as we evolve and grow. It will have its ups and downs. It will have its moments when it comes easy, and its moments when it seems hard.

So who do you say I am? Who is Jesus in your life? Is Jesus the one who comforts you in times of suffering because He's been there Himself? Is He the one who carries you when life feels too heavy to bear? Is He the one who gives you the courage to be you? Gives you the courage to know that that's more than enough? When you are up late at night in the kitchen staring at a problem that no one else knows about, no one else understands, is He the one sitting next to you, knowing, understanding, and offering a ray of hope? When we wander, when we lose our direction in life, when we go looking for love and salvation in all the wrong places, is Jesus the Good Shepherd, the one who never quits looking for us? And the one who keeps bringing us home again and again?

These are just some of the ways that I have answered that question over my life. But as important as those answers have been for me, they are incomplete if they remain only about me. Yes, the church is a kind of spiritual hospital for those wounded by the world. And yes, Jesus is our great healer. But once we've heard that good news, once we've received God's forgiveness and experienced His unconditional love and His grace, once we've been healed by His forgiveness, the question becomes what will we do with it? To what end do we receive it?

For Paul, as we heard in his letter to the Romans today, the answer is clear. We are to give it away. We are to share the gospel that we have received with the gifts we've been given. Our prayer book in Eucharistic Prayer C puts it this way. "Deliver us, Lord, from the presumption of coming to this table for solace only, and not for strength. For pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ that we may worthily serve the world in his name."

Being in communion with Jesus means being fed ourselves and sent out to feed others. It means being healed and empowered to heal others. It means being accepted for who we are, but also transformed so that we might forgive and accept others, even those who reject us.

So who is Jesus to you? And while I promise that we won't have an oral exam in front of the whole congregation, you are not off the hook. Share your answer with somebody. Share it with your spouse on the drive home. Or with the kids over dinner. Or with the grandkids next time you have them over. Or with a trusted friend over coffee. Have you done that lately? Have you done that ever?

My dad, he never took us to church growing up. And he certainly never talked about his faith or any of his thoughts on religion. He's a pretty private guy. He never really learned how to share his feelings. But one day, when I was about 10 or 11, he found me thumbing through a book on witchcraft, of all things. It was given to me by a friend. We were into fantasy games and Dungeons and Dragons at the time. And I was just being a curious kid. I didn't think much of it, but it really bothered my dad in a way that really took me by surprise.

Speaking of Caesarea Philippi, I think he was worried that I was going to get sucked into some kind of pagan cult. So he took me aside and he sat me down. And for the next hour or so, he told me about the time when he was a young boy about the same age, when he saw his mom die of a heart attack, right in front of him. And then how his own dad then died about a year later.

And then he shared with me, with tears streaming down his face, someone who'd never cried in front of me ever, he shared with me that the only way he survived that time in his life, the only way he was able to get out of bed each day was Jesus. And it was Jesus who had literally saved his life when he thought he had lost it all. He had never talked about any of that before and has never talked about it since. But it had a profound impact on me. And looking back, I can see in the rear-view mirror of my life, maybe it was there that a certain seed of faith was planted without me even realizing it.

Like my former bishop, I want to encourage each of you to reflect on this question, to wrestle with it. And just as importantly, do not keep the answer to yourself. You will never know. You can never imagine the impact your witness could have on someone. You never know what the Holy Spirit could do with it. And so as we leave here this morning, as we return to our Caesarea Philippis, where we too will be soon surrounded again by false idols of every kind, demanding our attention at every turn, I encourage you, and my prayer for you, for all of us, is that we will continue to revisit the question that Jesus poses today, that we may continue to wrestle with it. Who is Jesus in our life? And that we may be strengthened and renewed to share our answer with the world who needs it so much.

Amen.