

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

A ROCK-SOLID BLESSING

Matthew 16:13-20

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Analysis by James Squire

13 Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” 14And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” 15He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” 17And 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. 18And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 19I 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.” 20Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Author's Note: By the time we witness this encounter between Jesus and his disciples, the disciples are having a hard time keeping up. Just after they watch Jesus confront the Pharisees for demanding a sign from him, Jesus warns them to “beware the yeast of the Pharisees”; the disciples figure it's because they have forgotten to bring bread with them. They have taken him literally; he is speaking figuratively. Jesus expected them to

figure this out after watching him feed thousands twice with a few loaves and a couple of fish, but they are having trouble understanding him.

In today's Gospel, Jesus is in a quizzical mood for some reason. "Who do people say that the Son of Man is? ... But who do you say that I am?" Fishing for a compliment? It doesn't seem likely, given the verses immediately following our text. Interestingly enough, this is more obvious in Mark's account, where Peter's "right" answer is immediately followed by a rebuke from Jesus. Here, we have to look beyond the speech about the keys of the kingdom to hear Jesus say to Peter, "Get behind me Satan!" But peek ahead, folks. It's there. So, no, Jesus is not fishing for a compliment.

DIAGNOSIS: Telling Jesus Who He Is

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Blind to Jesus' Purpose*

What Jesus seems to be doing with the disciples is revealing what is lacking in "flesh and blood" (v. 17). No matter our level of church involvement, be it pew-sitting on Sunday morning, influential core member with finger squarely on the pulse of the congregation, or something in between, we remain blind to Jesus' purpose among us, and vulnerable to the yeast of the Pharisees (13:6). Flesh and blood, at best, reveals Jesus as our bail-bondsman, our enabler, our cosmic aspirin, but not as our messiah. After all, a messiah is a lot more than a rescuer. A messiah is anointed as our Lord, one who rules over us for our own good.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Affront to Jesus' Authority*

Flesh and blood fights against that; flesh and blood wants to

rule over itself. We want to decide who and what Jesus is to be in our lives. We decide what yeast we want rising in our lives, and that includes the yeast of Jesus. We have many different names for him: rebel, activist, tolerance personified, upholder of the law, advocate for the sanctity of marriage, final judge of the living and the dead, expeller of man-made traditions, the embodiment of biblical inerrancy, and the list can go on forever. Always it is we who assign this or that title to Jesus, never mind that we can't agree on which one to use. We are perpetually blind to the fact that we have no authority to assign a title to Jesus in the first place.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Cursed by Jesus' Father*

In fact, we lack Jesus' blessing to name his authority for us. Nor can the names with which we flesh and blood creatures endow Jesus earn us divine blessing. What we receive instead (for our unsolicited naming of Jesus, and many other offenses) is what we deserve: the divine curse. It is as if the Father steps up and says, "Here, let me show you who and what I am." This is the kind of revelation that is bound to kill us. This is the Father apart from the Son, and we cannot survive exposure to this God.

PROGNOSIS: Jesus Makes Us Who We Are

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Ransomed by the Father's Son*

But the Father is one with the Son; and this Son stepped into this breach (later in Matthew's passion) and said, "This is who and what I AM." Poignantly, that encounter with the Jewish authorities and Pilate came at a time when they insisted on determining whether Jesus was "the Messiah." to which Jesus responded, "You have said so" (26:64). Then he showed them and us what a Messiah truly is, as he hung on the cross outside Jerusalem. Of course, these authorities weren't longing for this

kind of a Messiah. They were trying to get Jesus to own the name of messiah so they could crucify him. And Jesus did own the name, not by endowing himself with it, but by living into it; that's precisely how he becomes our Messiah: he dies for us, because of us, takes on the burden of our actions, absorbs our evil in his death, and extinguishes its power in his resurrection. No, we can't look around us or inside of us and see the total absence of all evil. But we have someone in our corner who is willing to die for us and rise like yeast in us every day.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Reborn under Jesus' Authority*

This same Messiah has worn our flesh and blood himself and offers his flesh and blood to us in his Holy Communion. He places himself in our hands on Sunday Mornings and says, "This is who and what I am for you. Take and eat." And in this particular Sunday gospel, he also says to us, "On this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (v. 18). That is how Jesus asserts his authority: by building his church in and through us. In fact, with these words he begins with Peter, bestowing divine blessing upon him. Whatever inspired Peter to identify Jesus as the Messiah, like Abraham with Yahweh (Genesis 15), Jesus reckoned it to Peter as righteousness. And, later, Peter wouldn't know what had hit him after Jesus was done making a church out of him. But even here, in his flesh and blood, Jesus had made an impression on Peter. Jesus identifies that something that moved Peter as "my Father in heaven"; it was the birth of Peter's faith. How that faith was conceived may be impossible for us to determine, but its birth is on display for us in this text. Peter still has a lot of growing to do, as the verses immediately following this text show, but he's off to a good start and, by the power of his Father in heaven, so are we upon whom Christ builds his church.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Vessels of Jesus' Mission*

This church that Christ builds in us has staying power. The gates of Hell can't defeat it (v. 18). The keys of the kingdom are being handed out willy-nilly (v. 19); common blokes, flesh and blood folks like you and I, have divine binding power (v. 19); but, far better, we have the authority to let loose a whole new regime of forgiveness on an unsuspecting world. Best of all—if you can wrap your mind around it—we are specifically directed NOT to parade gold statues of Messiah Jesus down Broadway or give him a Star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame (v. 20); for the truth is that while such “yeast of the Pharisees” may spread easily, it will not nourish or give life. The yeast of Jesus, on the other hand, may hardly seem potent enough to give rise to anything, but, through the freely spoken Word and freely distributed body and blood, it is in bountiful supply. How can such simple stuff be so potent? Not because we suddenly wear thick steel armor, not because we suddenly launch a hostile takeover of our society and put all our enemies under our thumb, but because death itself has been defeated for us. The simple yeast we live on has the power to give victory over death and the gates of Hell. This world can do a lot to us, but it cannot strip us of the keys of the kingdom that we've been given. What is more, Christ's ultimate reign is inevitable; it's going to happen. There is no deadline pressure, no yearly quota for us to fulfill; we are not called to fill stadiums. Instead, because the kingdom will come in all its fullness, we are moved to bind and release sin according to the gospel into which we have been reborn; knowing that, wherever we see the need we can trust that, through us, God will get the job done somehow.