

Pentecost 15, 2008
Good Hope Lutheran Church
Matthew 16: 13 – 17

The sermon text this week is once again drawn from the Gospel lesson, Matthew chapter 16. In this passage, Jesus is walking along with His 12 disciples when all of a sudden He stops, and turns, and asks them a question: Who do people say that I am? Who am I, tell me, how would the crowds answer. Well, the disciples stammer, some say you are John the Baptist, some say you are Elijah or some other prophet of old. OK fine, says Jesus. But who do you say that I am? And Peter—bless his pointed heart, Peter—Peter chirps up with the right answer. You are the Christ, Peter exclaims. You are the Son of the Living God.

The Lord be with you.
And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our spirits all be acceptable in your sight this day o Lord, our rock and our redeemer, AMEN.

A story, taken from the annals of psychiatry. It's supposed to be a funny story so, when I'm done, I'll point at you and you can all, chuckle politely.

It seems that once there was a man named Smith, and Smith lived in a small little town in Wisconsin. And Smith believed completely and sincerely that he was not Smith at all; rather, he believed that in reality, he was actually Napoleon Bonaparte. Smith strutted around his home in an antique French army uniform. He kept his hand firmly in his lapel, and issued orders to personal aides no one else could see, and he stewed over the maps of Austerlitz and Waterloo. Every day and in every way, Smith believed, he was actually the French emperor Napoleon.

Well, as you can imagine, after a while this became a real nuisance to his poor wife Mrs. Smith, and the dear woman simply begged her husband to get professional help. Finally, he consented, and on the appointed day Smith mounted the Imperial Carriage for the 60 mile trip into Milwaukee.

The psychiatrist, a kindly woman, met them at the door. "Tell me sir," she said. "Do you know why you are here?"

"Of course I know why I'm here!" he thundered. "I am after all the emperor of France, I am aware of these details. I am here because of my wife, poor woman. She thinks she's really Mrs. Smith."

End of story, thank you, chuckle politely; ok. In our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus is out for a walk with the 12 disciples, when suddenly He turns on them and asks a surprisingly difficult question: Who am I? What do the crowds say about Me but even more importantly—what do you say? Who am I? Tough question. Not easy, because at this point in the story nobody was really all that sure about this Jesus guy. He did some amazing things all right, He worked some incredible miracles and obviously He wasn't your ordinary everyday carpenter. But then, if not a carpenter, who was He?

And what you have to see here is that the question was actually even harder than that—more than asking the disciples to guess His identity, Jesus was also asking them about their own identity. More than just Who am I, in a fundamental way Jesus was also asking, Who are you? Who are you, because if Jesus was only a carpenter, then the disciples could still be fishermen. If Jesus was only a carpenter, then the disciples didn't really have to be disciples—they could be fishermen, tax collectors, ordinary guys just hanging out for a spell. If Jesus was just a carpenter who said pleasant things about love and forgiveness once in a while well then so what, the “disciples” could stick around until they got bored; listen to what they liked and forget the rest; and then go home to the fish market, business as usual, no big deal. But if Jesus was more than that. If Jesus was God's own Son, come to earth to die and rise again for us and for our salvation, if that's who Jesus was. Then who are you guys? Not fishermen anymore, that's for sure.

You may see yourself as Napoleon Bonaparte, but if your wife says she's Mrs. Smith then something doesn't fit. Something has to change. If she's right then you're wrong, it's *you* that's got to change. These 12 guys, Peter and the others, they may have seen themselves as fishermen or tax collectors or whatever else but if Jesus really is the Son of God the Savior of the world then something doesn't fit here. Something would have to change. *They*, would have to change.

I believe that when we look at this text, we really don't hear the full question Jesus was asking. We hear Jesus ask Who am I, and by golly we know the answer. By gum we've hung around church long enough to know this one, who is Jesus well He's God Son our Savior. He's the one

promised by the prophets of old, He's the one born in Bethlehem on Christmas Day, sleeping His first nights on earth in a cattle trough. He's the one who suffered and died and rose again, the one soon to come again, that's who Jesus is. Even if you sleep through every sermon every single Sunday you know by now what the answer is supposed to be. Jesus is God's Son our Savior, right?

Great. But if that's who Jesus is, then who are you? Wake up for a minute and think, if that's really who Jesus is. Who are you. Can you still be the same old sinner you've been all along? Can you leave here this morning, business as usual, can you go on with your life unchanged? Is there room for half-hearted faith and half-baked discipleship, if Jesus is who you say He is? Far too many "disciples" these days spend one or two Sunday mornings a month confessing Jesus as Lord, while every other moment is spent living as though He was only a carpenter! Doesn't work that way. If Jesus is God's Son our Savior, then some things in our lives don't fit anymore. Some things in our lives have to change. We, have to change.

The Good News in the Gospel lesson today is not simply Peter's intellectual breakthrough. Peter did indeed undergo an intellectual breakthrough, by the grace of God his mind came to a sudden realization. But this isn't just about what your mind realizes. Faith is not agreeing with something intellectually, it's not a set of facts you learn or a series of right answers you memorize. Faith is a day in day out relationship with Jesus Christ, faith is the life you live. It's confessing Jesus as Lord, then acting like it each day. It's acknowledging Him on Sunday, then following Him on Monday. It's hearing about love and forgiveness, and receiving it, and sharing it. Giving it. It's changing and being changed, being made inside and out the person God has always wanted you to be, if Jesus is the Son of God the Savior you cannot be the same person you've always been. And the Good News is, you won't be. You will be a child of God, this day, and forever—so may it be for all of us, in the name of Jesus Christ, AMEN.