

“Identity: Why We Are Disciples”

Sermon for First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Decatur, Georgia
Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 8, 2019
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Holy Scriptures: Matthew 16: 13-20

Now 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, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “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, you are Peter, and on this rock 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.”

Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Sermon

After church was over,

a mom asked her daughter what she’d learned in children’s church.

“We were taught to go out into all the world and make disciples of all nations.”

She said, *“But we just sat.”*

Well, fellow followers of Jesus Christ, we disciples like to get out into all the world.

This past Wednesday Ron Smith, our Church Facility Manager,
needed to take a day off to tend to some personal business.

Well, Wednesday happens to be one of the regular weekdays

Ron picks up trash and empties garbage cans across the street
in our Church Park and Playground.

Even though I knew the big picture of Ron Smith’s clean up routine,
he nicely gave me the details in advance so I could do it right.

Don disposable gloves.

Go to church park with our wheelbarrow and 4 empty trash bags.

Place into wheelbarrow filled garbage bags from the pet waste station & 3 trash cans.

Restock trash cans and pet waste station with empty bags.

Return & toss full trash bags into dumpster in the alley.

Got it.

Wednesday morning,

wearing dress shoes, slacks, pressed shirt, my Church Pastor ID badge,
& disposable plastic gloves,

I pushed our wheelbarrow across the street to our park,
careful not to let the empty trash bags fly away.
Upon entering the park, I could see maybe a dozen women with children.
Some were in the shade structure, some over by the swing set, some on park benches.
They all looked up to see who was entering the space.
As I drew nearer, steadily pushing the wheelbarrow to get to the trashcans,
I called out a greeting and announced my name and role.
“Where is Mr. Ron?” asked a young woman. “He’s such a nice man.”
“I’ll tell him you said that,” I said. “He can’t be here today, so I have the honor.”
“Well,” she said, “your church gives Christians a good name.”

Your Church Gives Christians a Good Name

Mark Twain said, “I can live two months on a good complement.”
We could just stop here, resting on the laurels of her complement,
feel really good about who we are,
and maybe that would be okay.
But hold on: Who gives Disciples of Christ a name to make good?
It’s too easy, too self-aggrandizing to pat our selves on the back,
to shine our little lights at one another
and let the rays of light bounce off these lovely windows and walls,
reflecting back upon us our own glow,
so what we see and worship
is merely a projected image of our own glory.
It’s insufficient for us to say,
“Yes, we do have a good name, we got it all going on,
we are doing so many good works in Jesus’ name,
we are loving and serving, singing and praying, open and affirming,
opening doors and extending open hands.
Our reputation in the community is solid.
Like she said, this congregation gives Christians a good name.”

So, hold on, my friends.
If anyone deserves a complement for giving Christians a good name,
let’s give credit where credit is due.
Let’s back up to Who defines us, to Whose we are,
Who gives us our sense of purpose,
Who provides any and all power we might have and hold.
I interpret a Melissa Etheridge song lyric to be about our Creator’s identity:
“Yes, I Am -- your passion, your promise, your end. Yes, I Am.”
Christ, the Son of I Am, is with us in our beginning and our end,
an end which provides a new beginning in and of itself.

Every now and then it is good to get back to the basics.
As you know, Messiah means Savior,
and the first disciples identified Jesus of Nazareth
as the Messiah, as the Savior of the world.

We get our name by being disciples, followers, students
of our Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God.

What's in a name, a title, anyway?

Why does His identity matter?

And what about our own identity as disciples?

It all starts with love.

God loves you.

We get our name from the One who loves us, who saves us, who offers salvation,
the One who redeems us, renews us, again and again and again,
because He loves us.

Jesus Christ is the One who gives us our name,
our Sense of Self, our identity,
our passion, our promise, our end.

And He is right here, within you and in all the world.

They say some seekers and searchers
invest a lot of energy looking for what is already provided.

D. R. Davies can relate.

Davies wrote *In Search of Myself*, in which the author said,
"I found myself in finding God.

*What I was searching for was my own identity,
and without knowing it my search was for God."*

The search for meaning and identity that is found in God
reminds me of the true story of Sam Keen,
who so much wanted to be happy and shake his feeling of
emptiness. (Story by John R. Claypool)

Sam decided that getting an Ivy League degree and becoming a professor
would bring true happiness.

Even though he attained these goals,

he could not shake his feelings of "nobody -ness."

One night, alone in the dark, Sam said aloud, *"What must I do to be saved?"*

The answer became abundantly clear.

"Nothing, nothing at all. It comes with the territory or it doesn't come at all."

Suddenly Sam Keen came to the conclusion

that he *"had been like a man riding on an ox, looking for an ox to ride."*

For responses that help guide our daily walk through life,
we look to the Word in which we overhear a conversation
between Jesus Christ and the first disciples.

*Now 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, but others Elijah,
and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."*

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "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, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...*

In our weekly Prayer List Email,
our Church Administrator Diane Hunter [L1](#) shared her insight on this passage:

“Ever have one of those ‘Ah ha moments’ where your mind just clicks to make something clear that was puzzling before?”

This happened to Simon in the district of Caesarea Philippi during a discussion about the identity of Jesus.

After listening to the various ideas of who Jesus might be -- which included the reincarnation of various prophets – Simon pops off with “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

I can imagine there was a stunned silence for a moment or two before Jesus affirms Peter’s pronouncement.

To be sure that rest of the room understands what just happened, Jesus declares that Simon’s ‘Ah ha moment’ had a divine influence...

...Once Jesus affirms Simon’s divine revelation, he blesses him with a new name, Peter (meaning Rock—not to be confused with Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson), and declares he will build the church on ‘this rock.’

It is only fitting that while researching this text, I had an ‘Ah ha moment’ too.

I noticed that ‘this rock’ that Jesus is referring to is not Peter—it is the confession “you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

In other words, Jesus, who Paul refers to as the ‘foundation,’ (I Corinthians 3:11) is the rock of the church...

...That is some ‘Ah ha moment’ for Peter.”

Ah ha moments abound.

Jesus winks, nods, points his thumb at His chest: *This Rock is this guy.
Stand on my shoulders, and I will lift you up.*

We See Who Gives Christians Our Good Name

I love that Jesus makes His point with a wink and a smile and wordplay.
I love that Jesus defines our identity through Him.
He is “this rock” upon which the church is built.
Christ is “the rock” from which we get our good name.
The Messiah is the One, “this rock” upon which our identity is grounded.
Our foundation is unshakable; it is solid; it’s as sure as the Love of God.

Like Peter, which in Greek is Petras, the rock,
we confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God,
and proclaim Him Lord and Savior of the world,
requiring nothing more—and nothing less—
as a basis of our life together.

I love the simplicity and depth of this tenet of the faith.
I love this rock on which we stand,

that you and I can belong to this Disciples movement of God's people
whether or not we believe in apostolic or any creedal statements,
that what matters the most is what matters the most:
confess, profess, accept, welcome in the love of a loving, living God.
That is a rock we can stand on, trust in, gather around,
a foundation upon which we can build our life and meaning,
an identity we can embody, a love and compassion we can share.
34 years ago, at our wedding in Park Avenue Christian Church,
I was supposed to say in my vow
that I would love Betty Brewer as a creation of God.
I was so nervous, however, I said, "I love you as a creature of God."
Betty--my all-time favorite creature and creation--
introduced me to the Christian Church.
After participating in the Christian Church,
slowly but surely, I began to fall in love with this Body of Christ.

I would really like to hear what drew you in and intrigues you about the Disciples.

I fell in love with a believer's baptism,
that we baptize souls at an age of understanding,
supporting each person's faith journey,
being big enough and ecumenical enough and universal enough
to recognize other church baptisms.

I fell in love with gathering weekly at the Lord's Table,
knowing that no matter what,
I and everyone else is welcome and affirmed as a child of God.

I came to look forward to the invitation to commune with Christ and His people,
to partake of the Bread of Life and Cup of the New Covenant,
to cherish the space made in worship
for meditation and prayer and feeding one another.

I fell in love with the Disciples understanding of Holy Scriptures.

Disciples look to the Holy Bible
to offer us inspired and inspiring words for life and life everlasting.

We look to the God the Bible points us toward,
choosing to worship not a book but the One True God the book describes,
relishing and feasting on the testimonies of faith
that make up the Old and New Testaments.

I fell in love with the courage of Disciples who are not afraid to ask questions,
to open our minds to interpret and wonder about the Holy Scriptures,
to explore biblical history and context and culture,
to take in and decide for our selves what we think
about various interpretations of the Holy Bible.

Imagine how dull bible study would be without ah ha moments,
which begin with open minds and hearts
that are not the work of flesh and blood,
but unbound inspiration and imagination.

I love that we are asked to not check our brains at the door,

that we celebrate meeting God and one another
at the intersections of science and spirituality,
of faith and reason, of prayer and practice,
of communal worship and community service,
of connecting body, mind, heart and soul
with God's passion & promise & end.

Teresa Hord Owens is General Minister and President
of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Dr. Owens is also in love with being a Disciple of Jesus Christ.

When asked about the intersection of church and community,^[2] she said:

"We serve, we advocate, we speak in accordance with an understanding of the teachings of Jesus, even when we struggle and disagree with specific interpretations of text or teaching.

Within our church, we seek to ensure that all voices are heard.

If we start with love, we will understand that the way in which we engage one another, even when we [differ], is a hallmark of Christian discipleship."

"As Christians, we are often comfortable addressing daily human needs but not so comfortable in speaking to the systemic injustices that are at the root of the problem.

When we talk about "justice" rather than "mission," many [people] will be uncomfortable, saying that the church is being "political."

"And yet some would argue that addressing these unjust systems is indeed evangelism, and a witness to the love of God for all."

"These commitments to love and diversity can enable the church to model faithful engagement with the world's concerns that respects the humanity and dignity of all." [3]

I love that for us Disciples, all means all.

God loves all; Christ welcomes all; all are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

This is Who and Whose we are:

we are Disciples of Christ, a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.

We stand on this rock.

We confess Him as Lord and Savior of the world.

And then He sends us out, out into parks and neighborhoods and nations.

We go out to love one and all, together.

Christ empowers us to live into this identity together,

to worship and pray together,

practice and serve together,

fight for justice together,

to embody loving kindness and compassion, together.

So, into God's world we go "to model faithful engagement"

with real concerns and real neighbors in a loving way

"that respects the humanity and dignity of all."

United in Christ, we disciples will take out the trash, do the dishes,
hold grieving hands, seek the ways of peacemaking, give generously,
live into a bright future, not holding anything back.

You know, when disciples do that, do this, become this,
people will look at you and say,
“Your church gives Christians a good name.”

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

^[1] [Meditation on Matthew 16: 13-20](#), By Diane Hunter, Church Administrator, First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia, September 4, 2019.

^[2] “Do politics belong in church? 11 pastors and theologians weigh in” [Christian Century Magazine](#) September 24, 2018.

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