

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday August 23, 2026 Proper 16A
Text: Matthew 16:13-23 Who do you say that I am?

What a strange last line in the Gospel today! “Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.” Why does he tell them not to tell anyone else? Other places in the Gospels it seems like he wants them to shout it from the rooftops. But on many occasions throughout his ministry Jesus asks his disciples to keep it secret. Why do you think that Jesus might do this? One of the most compelling reasons for me is that Jesus is saying that every one of us has to come to it for themselves. We are not allowed to let someone else do our spiritual homework for us. I love the idea that Jesus is saying that if you want to have a relationship with me, you are going to have to work at it yourself. In some circles, it's enough just parroting back what the church or clergy or the bishop say is important. And it's not that the church's teaching or clergy don't have something important to offer about the content of the faith. But I think that these words of Jesus are a kind of relational challenge. The Episcopal Church, of my lived experience, is not really a place where people just want to be told by the clergy what to believe. Episcopalians are too rascally and thoughtful not to mention headstrong and rogue for that kind of thing. In fact, I'm sometimes amused by what people feel like they need to tell me that they don't believe. But the real question, is what is your experience of Jesus in your own life?

The Episcopal Church is a community where we are working out our salvation, struggling to make sense of the Christian faith and tradition in our own lives. In fact, we actually want people to know that they can “Belong before you Believe.” You can be on a journey, you can be in process, you can be just checking Jesus out, you can be searching for a

relationship with God. You do not have to believe 6 impossible things before breakfast to belong at St. Mark's or in the Episcopal Church.

I love what this Gospel story is telling us. "Who do you say that I am?" "What have you experienced of God at work in your life?" "What have you discovered personally about Jesus?" "What do you believe to be true about Jesus' way of love?" "What knowledge do you have so far?" I believe that Jesus is asking each of us to answer this question for ourselves. "Who do you say that Jesus is?" Is he just God, Jesus, well ok that's a good starting point, it was good enough for Peter, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Is he someone that you really try to imitate: that beautiful and challenging human being? Is he someone that you really think about at all every day? Is he someone that you admire and really try to follow after? This is something that each of us has to try to answer. No one can experience Jesus for you. Jesus is wooing you into having your own experience of God. Oh, I'm not saying that the experience of community is not important. I think it's vitally important to be around others that are trying to get to know Jesus, around people who are trying to live like he lived or do the things that Jesus said were important. But in the end no one else can do the relational work for you. David and Sylvia and I can stir the pot on Sunday mornings and urge you to look more closely or to pray a little more, to forgive more generously, and love a little more deeply. Spiritual friends can challenge you to go deeper and observe what is happening in your life but finally, all of us are called to have our own relationship with God in Christ. We have to take responsibility for that relationship.

This might mean that it's time for you to start reading and meditating on scripture, you can do that, start with just a few minutes a day. Perhaps it means that you are going to do more spiritual reading. Maybe you need

to journal a bit about your life to see the traces of the Spirit at work? There are so many ways to grow in loving relationship with God and the world of faith offers itself to your imagination. Don't make it too hard or don't think that having this relationship with Jesus is something that you cannot do. Go out to coffee with a friend and talk about the wonder of the world, the grace in your life, where you are finding energy and joy and that will tell you where God is at work in you.

If you grew up catholic this passage was probably preached about quite energetically about Peter being the rock upon which the church would be built aka the Papacy. And that's fine, I rather like the pope Leo and Francis was amazing, I am moved when they speak truth to power and stand up for a profound and uncomfortable reading of the gospel, reminding us all that love of God and neighbor is at the very center of who we are called to be as Christians as good human beings. I am cheering when they school world leaders on what the teaching of Jesus really mean. And interestingly, just two chapters later than our reading today, in chapter 18 Jesus says the identical thing to the whole community. Whatever you bind on earth, will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 18:18) So Jesus is not just talking to Peter or church leaders, he's talking to the people of God, he's talking to all of us. Peter may be asked to lead by example since he is a kind of symbolic leader but the passage is so much bigger than that, it's about how we choose to engage in the spiritual life. Finally, the decisions of love or closedness, our postures of generosity or tightness that your own heart reveals are pretty much how you are going to pass on the message. Each of us are actually walking, talking, breathing messengers of the good news of God's love in Christ. So it

really matters how you are growing in Christ, how you are progressing in the life of the Spirit. Each of us are part of the message.

In his writing Richard Rohr, founder of the Center for Action and Contemplating right her in Albuquerque's South Valley talks about the danger of becoming a closed down person, so many people start off with some real passion and desire for God they are earnest in prayer and really engaged in growing spiritually and slowly they start to give up to close down. Sadly there are a lot of closed down people, of course I'm not talking about you but you may know someone that has become more and more turned in on themselves. They look around and see that no one is really trying that hard and decide I guess I'm not going to try too hard either, no one is really that loving, I'm not going to be that loving either.

Without a constant infusion of the Holy Spirit, without a constant desire and trust Lord, give me your Holy Spirit!—we all close down. We do! It's the nature of life to circle the wagons around the smaller and smaller self, to take fewer and fewer risks, and to never go outside of your own comfort zone of people who are just like us. Friends and siblings in Christ, don't do that! We're all going to be gone in a few years. Look around you in 10, or 15 or 20 years many of us will not be here. We only get one chance to live this life of love. Every day is a lesson in love, learning how not to bind up ourselves and our neighbors, but in fact to liberate and free ourselves and others. (Rohr) What was it Bp. Curry used to say "if's not loving, liberating and life giving, it's not of God." Jesus is saying here to Peter and to all of us is that he will back up what we do. Jesus has our back, we can live in the wildness of God's expansive love we don't need to close down. We are Jesus' emissaries. As St. Teresa says, "We are the only hands and feet, the only eyes and

ears that Jesus has.” [1] Jesus has handed over the mission and the mystery and the wonder of the kingdom of God to each of us.

I wonder if we believe that every day is a lesson in love. My childhood picture of God was a pretty mixed bag. As many of you know I was raised at a time when movies and books about the second coming were popular. Watching the film “A Thief in the Night” about people being left behind at the rapture while others were taken up into heaven scared the bejeebies out of me. I did not want to get left behind and I became pretty devout and very concerned about avoiding hell or anything that resembled it. What I’m trying to say is that for many years my faith was really deeply fear based, trying to be good and trying to avoid the fires of hell. Sadly I think that there are a lot of people whose faith is based in fear, fear of God punishing them, fear of not making the mark, fear of weeping and gnashing of teeth. And this of course is a great travesty, this kind of theology has meant that a great many people, instead of being motivated by love of God are motivated out of a fear of hell and judgement and it’s ruined so much of our spiritual life. It’s destroyed so much and is such bad theology. A spirituality motivated by fear is so corrosive to the actual gospel of love. I know so many people that are motivated by fear, they grew up thinking that God was an eternal torturer, yikes, how bad can it actually get, that’s awful. But I know how it feels as I lived it too. Why would anyone love such a God who himself knows nothing about love, who tells you to love unconditionally but he doesn’t, who tells you to love your enemies but he doesn’t. It doesn’t work, because that is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When I first encountered the Episcopal Church, I remember how amazed and refreshed I was to hear that the core of the gospel was God’s love, God’s unconditional love. I found that I could embrace a church where my hopes were affirmed rather than my fears and I came back to life in a new way.

Recently I enjoyed a documentary film about the poet Mary Oliver at the guild theatre subtitled Saved by the Beauty of the world. I offer you this poem by Mary Oliver on the importance of living in love rather than fear of finding yourself alive in this beautiful world that surrounds us.

Wild Geese

by Mary Oliver (1935–2019)

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting—
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

Originally published in the collection, [Dream Work](#) (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986).

Until we can live every day of our lives motivated by love, rather than by fear, this whole Gospel will not work. It will not change the world, it will not change you, and it will not change the people around us. So let's expect love to grow here for that will make all the difference. Let's begin again to discover who Jesus really is for each of us.

Bonus material, part of poem by Mary Oliver about the spiritual life:

Love for the earth and love for you are having such a long conversation in my heart.