

**“Come, Follow Me: Confessing”**  
Matthew 16:13-27

Today we will begin with a joke about speeding which has a point: <https://youtu.be/1ToiZEzWwN8>. What we say or think matters and it makes a difference. According to the daughter of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “Words, he often wrote, are themselves sacred, God’s tool for creating the universe, and our tools for bringing holiness — or evil — into the world. He used to remind us that the Holocaust did not begin with the building of crematoria, and Hitler did not come to power with tanks and guns; it all began with uttering evil words, with defamation, with language and propaganda. Words create worlds he used to tell me when I was a child. They must be used very carefully. Some words, once having been uttered, gain eternity and can never be withdrawn. The Book of Proverbs reminds us, he wrote, that death and life are in the power of the tongue.”

And so today we focus on the importance of our confession/our words and thoughts about Jesus for discipleship. Even though discipleship is a way of life, it matters what we think and say about the one we are following. To help us with this, we will consider the example of Peter’s confession of faith about Jesus.

Jesus and his disciples were traveling to the region of Caesarea Philippi. This was a city built up by Herod Philip after the death of his father, Herod the Great. Caesarea Philippi was about 20-25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee at the base of Mount Hermon. This is a mountain cluster that I used to see often when we went from Damascus to the village where my dad was born. It was often snowcapped and majestic. The snow melt from the mountain would collect in a system of channels eroded into the mountain. These channels fed several springs and waterfalls which eventually gathered into tributaries that fed the Jordan River. Caesarea Philippi was built around the Banias Spring which is one of the main tributaries forming the Jordan River. All of this to say that the location of the dialogue and confession of Peter was significant. One can imagine that Jesus was taking them to the source of the waters of the Jordan in order to remind them that he was the living water of life.

This is a turning point in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus is finishing up his ministry in Galilee and is beginning to focus on heading towards Jerusalem. Caesarea Philippi was a city built on the site of an earlier city, Paneas, named after the Greek God Pan. Herod the Great built a temple in that city in honor of Caesar Augustus. It was a temple dedicated to the emperor cult of Rome which supported a vision of peace through violence and oppression as blessed by the gods. At this turning point and in that location, Jesus asks the disciples to tell him about their understanding of his ministry. First the question is about who the general public understood Jesus to be. Then the question turns to the disciples about their understanding of Jesus. When Peter gives the definition of Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus praises Peter, but gives him a strange title, Peter son of Jonah. Jonah was a fickle kind of prophet. He defied God but eventually learned to do the right thing.

When Peter disagrees with Jesus about his coming suffering, Jesus rebukes him for saying that. This makes it hard for us as the readers because the word Messiah is the Hebrew word for the Greek word "Christ" which means, "the anointed one." To us, the title Christ indicates that Jesus was the one sent and blessed by God to lead the people of Israel to renewal of the covenant. One of our favorite musical masterpieces is Handel's Messiah which we tend to sing every Easter. Why would Jesus react so negatively to Peter's designation of him as the Messiah? Why would Jesus call Peter Satan for saying that?

Some interpretations have been given by saying that Jesus was too humble to accept the title. Others say that the author of Matthew was trying to show us that the identity of Jesus was kept secret until the end. But the key to understanding the word Messiah/Christ in this passage at the time of Jesus is to look at its political connotations. The title Messiah was given to the kings of Israel and Judah. Just like we call our president, "Commander-in-Chief," the Hebrew people called their kings the Messiah. The title, Messiah, was used for the one who held political, economic, and religious power, as a ruler of the people. In later centuries, the term became associated with the understanding of the Messiah as the "once and future king" in a purely spiritual way. No wonder Jesus rejected the title of Messiah because the model of such leadership was that of violence, manipulation and control. He did not accept the title because it would have implied that his mission was that of a king and a ruler who would just change the political system of his day. Jesus had bigger fish to fry. His mission was not limited to changing the top. He wanted to change the whole of his society. He wanted to change hearts and minds. He knew that real transformation could not come from using the same tactics of power and violence. Instead, Jesus preferred to use the term, "Son of Man" to describe his ministry. The "Son of Man" was a direct reference to scriptures in the Old Testament. The simple meaning of this term is a male human being as found in Numbers 23, Job 35 and Ezekiel 2. But the significant meaning of this term comes from its use in the book of Daniel 7:13-14, "I saw one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One (that is, God), and was presented before him. To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed." This "Son of Man" was also described in a Jewish religious book that was written around the time of Jesus called Enoch. This book is highly respected by the Jews. The description of the "Son of Man" in it is very significant in light of what Jesus said about himself. Enoch's "Son of Man" is the Elect One who will sit on the throne of glory in order to "try the works" of the righteous and the holy (Enoch 45:3). His concern will not be the accumulation of power and wealth, but the building of justice and equity (chs. 46-48, 62-71). He will remove from their thrones any kings or priests who have persecuted or worked against the poor or weak (46:4-8). He will call forth the practice of a politics of justice, an economics of shared wealth that will eliminate poverty and the building of a people in relationship with God (chs. 46-48). And this will include, not just Jews, but Gentiles, as well. In fact, the Son of Man is called a "light to the Gentiles" (48:4). Most significant, the "Son of Man" will not be a conquering Messiah, but rather a suffering one who will be killed by the systems but will rise triumphant to "sit on the throne of his glory" (62:2-5). It is very clear that it is Enoch's model of the Son of Man that most captured

Jesus' understanding of the ministry to which he was called far more fully than did the more triumphalist image of "Messiah." That is exactly why we see Peter not liking Jesus' definition of himself as the Son of Man.

Peter was expecting Jesus to be a leader like all the others who would eventually lead a revolt against the Romans. Peter and the rest of the disciples needed to be challenged to understand that Jesus' model for social change did not depend on the typical tools of power and violence but on the vision of the kingdom of God as empowerment, justice and love. The spring of water of Banias was a better image for understanding Jesus. He was the Messiah that would bring about the water of life.

Since words and thoughts matter, it is important for us to respond to Jesus' question today for ourselves, much like Peter did, "Who do you say that I am?" Pondering who Jesus is for us is an essential part of discipleship. With centuries of interpretation and even misinterpretation of the ministry of Jesus, we need to renew our understanding of Jesus as the humble one of God who brings about the water of life with love instead of force. In our popular Christian culture, Jesus is understood to be some kind of otherworldly or heavenly figure that is concerned with the salvation of our souls only. For some Christians, Jesus is seen also as a powerful being that gives them prosperity, wealth and protection as a reward for believing in him. To these Christians, the image of Jesus coming back as a triumphant king, a lion, is taken literally to mean that Jesus will use force to end the battle between good and evil. In our time, a dominant image of Jesus as Messiah is that of a sacrificial offering to satisfy the anger of God against the sinfulness of humanity. That is why we need to reclaim Jesus' own understanding of his ministry. We need to reclaim the title of the "Son of Man" and the "the Living Water" with a focus on service and love instead of power and violence. And when we use the title of Messiah, we have to be careful to associate it with the real ministries of Jesus which cannot be domesticated by our heavenly aspirations for spiritual salvation. Like Peter, we have to be challenged to see that Jesus was the one who was concerned about the pain and suffering of the world, and we are called to join him through ministries of love and self-giving and not through power or violence.

Pay attention to your breathing... Don't change it, just listen to it... As you inhale, breathe in all the love God has for you... As you exhale, feel all your distractions leave...any aches and pains ... any worries ... any distractions at all. Try to feel your heart beating...the heart God created for you. . . Now picture, right before you, a large door, standing all alone...Go to the door, push it open, and walk through. .. You find yourself in a beautiful garden...Take a moment to look around ...feel the grass beneath your feet ...smell the flowers...listen to the birds... Enjoy! In the distance you see a stream winding through the garden...There is a shade tree next to the stream, and a bench beneath the tree... Jesus is there, waiting for you...He smiles, and calls you by name... Go to him... [pause] Jesus takes you into his arms with a warm hug... "I'm so glad you came," he says. "Come, let's sit down and be together for awhile..." So you sit on the bench and enjoy each other's company... Think about what Jesus is like... Jesus takes you by the hand and says, "I have been with you always, through times of joy, and times of sadness." ...Jesus points out the stream, and invites you to go into the water to renew yourself as you call to mind

your Baptism or your birth... Together you go, hand in hand...To your surprise the water is warm and life-giving... Think about what it feels like...Then you and Jesus return to the bench...As you leave the water, you become completely dry, and your heart fills with God's peace...As you sit beside Jesus... you realize you can tell him anything...What do you tell Jesus?... How does he respond? Jesus then tells you it is time to go...but he invites you to return anytime and says he will be waiting... He tells you he will be with you throughout your journey as your companion...God, we thank you for this time of prayer...Amen.