Sermon for 13th Sunday after Pentecost Aug. 27, 2023 Matthew 16:16-30

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Dear Friends in Christ, grace be to you and peace from God our creator and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

A pivot is defined as a fixed point supporting something which turns or balances, or a person or thing on which something else depends. We can think of pivots as those irrigation systems in the fields that turn, covering the ground with sprays of water in a fan-like motion. Or we can also think of pivots as a turning point or a shift when something or someone moves in a different direction.

At this point in Matthew's gospel, here in chapter 16, there is a pivot in this text. Before this, as we've heard in these last several weeks in this season of Pentecost, Jesus has been teaching, he's been preaching, he's been telling parables, he's been healing people, he's been performing miracles and all the while he’s been doing these things, there's a sense that his identity is not completely clear. He's doing amazing things, he has said things that have been intriguing, people have flocked to him, and yet there's some unclarity about his identity. Up to this point in chapter 16 of Matthew’s gospel, there's still been some question for those around Jesus about who he is.

As we've just heard in this gospel reading, Jesus poses a question to the disciples who are around him. He asks the question, “who do people say that the son of man is?” There are some responses from his disciples: some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. As the disciples associate Jesus’ words and works that they have experienced and witnessed with prophets who had come before, they claim that they see a similar presence in him. And then Jesus asks another question: “But who do you say that I am?” And Peter responds, “you are the Messiah, the son of the living God.”

We're told in this text that Jesus and the disciples are in the district of Caesarea Philippi. What difference does it make that we are told where they're located? To be honest, in this instance, it's only helpful if we know a little bit about that district of Caesarea Philippi. Caesarea Philippi is an area north of the sea of Galilee, a ways away from the region where Jesus spent most of his ministry. It is the location of one of the largest springs feeding the Jordan River. By the time Jesus and the disciples would have been in this region it was known as an area where there were temples dedicated to a multitude of pagan gods. It was also known as a place of worship and a sanctuary for the Greek god Pan. It is also believed that this location was at the intersection of economic trade, religious activity and the impact of the Roman Empire. It is in this context that Jesus is engaged in this conversation with his disciples about his identity. Why does that matter? As Jesus asks the question and as Peter responds with his confession that Jesus is the Messiah, there is clarity in the claim that Jesus’ identity and his presence confront the multitude of pagan gods and the beliefs about him as just one in the line of the Old Testament prophets. The claim of Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God opens up a whole new view and understanding of him, for the disciples and for all who claim to be followers of Jesus. And it seems that Peter, who makes that audacious claim really has no understanding of what that means – either in the traditional understanding of the Messiah who was to come who would vanquish enemies, and certainly not in the understanding as Jesus reveals in the verses following this text what it means for him.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke's gospel all include a similar exchange with Jesus and his disciples, with slight variations in the question and the response of the disciples and Peter. Here in Matthew's gospel, when Jesus asks the question, “who do people say that I am?” Peter responds, “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.” This is a new revelation. This is something that we have known as the readers removed from this event, but this is something that is declared in Matthew's gospel that had not been stated before. This is a pivot, this is a pivot point in all of the Gospel of Matthew. Before this, there was some unclarity about who Jesus is, and after this point, Jesus’ identity as the Messiah, the Son of the living God becomes a central theme as the rest of Matthew unfolds. And Jesus reveals in the next verses what it means for him to be the Messiah.

In the text that is the gospel reading for next Sunday, Jesus tells the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer and be killed and rise on the third day. This is not what any of them expected of the Messiah who had been promised! Then Jesus offers another revelatory pivot statement as he says “if any want to come after me let them deny themselves take up their cross and follow me for those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Who do you say that Jesus is? That is the question that is posed for you and me. Who do we say that Jesus is? And what difference does it make about who we say Jesus is? Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior. But as it is revealed who he is, Jesus, from this point on is focused on his journey to Jerusalem. Jesus, at this point pivots and what before had been curious people coming to him wanting to understand, wanting to experience, to see the impact of what he was doing, are now asked a deeper and more complicated question. What are they, what are we going to do about this call to follow Jesus, to be his disciples? Jesus declares what it means for him to be the son of God; his journey now leads to death, to the crucifixion and the promise of the resurrection.

First English Lutheran Church in Great Falls has made the decision to close. In Oct. there will be an ending worship service of the congregation. This is a congregation that has been a fixture in downtown Great Falls for over a century. The church building is a large white stucco structure anchoring a corner in the neighborhood. But the legacy of the congregation will live on. Nearly 40 years ago, a group of people opened a food pantry. It was meant at that time for people in the congregation and the neighbors who were food insecure. Over time, they established policies to only allow people to get food once a month. People needed to have an ID. And the people who supported the pantry were mostly people from the congregation. In the last several years, Helping Hands has made a pivot. They hired a director and when Covid hit, they changed their requirements and began to make food available to people every week if they wanted. They began to give to anyone who came on a Saturday and did not require IDs. And over the last years, they have lived out a goal of sharing Gospel love to their neighbors, unconditional Gospel love. As the congregation has dwindled, the ministry and impact of Helping Hands has expanded. Like many of our larger communities in the Synod, homelessness has increased, and the needs of people has become more evident. And Helping Hands has responded. In a few months, the ministry of the congregation of First English Lutheran Church will move into the building and what had been a congregation will become a ministry of care and compassion for the people of Great Falls. What had been a fairly small and limited ministry is expanding and is reaching out not just to the people who are food insecure, but to others in the community who have come to volunteer, to be a part of a community that shares Gospel love. And as the ministry of Helping Hands expands, the leaders of the ministry are entering into partnerships and relationships with local schools, with other social service agencies who are seeking to address the needs in the community.

Helping Hand’s expansion is an example of a group of people seeking to follow Jesus and as the congregation dies, the legacy of the congregation will live on in Helping Hands as a ministry of love and compassion in Great Falls. There is a losing of a life and a gaining of new life in this situation.

In local communities, there are examples of similar services and acts of compassion and care for the sake of another. What or where are the places where your community and or congregation gives without expectation, with generosity and grace for the sake of others? Where and how do you share Gospel love without wondering what you will receive in return?

Many leaders in congregations today are noticing and wondering about what the future will bring, for their congregation and this world. There are questions and concerns about how to respond and what to do in these days. Maybe the pivot that is called for is to not look inward but outward.

Ted Lasso is a TV show on Apple TV that depicts a man who has been recruited to coach the Richmond Greyhounds, a professional soccer team in London. He had been a college football coach in the US and understands little about soccer. Rebecca, the owner of the club has recruited him because she wants Richmond to lose, because she became the owner in the divorce settlement with her ex-husband. Ted Lasso, over 3 seasons, develops relationships with Rebecca, as well as the other coaches and players. There is a darkness and pain that the viewer learns is really a part of almost all the casts’ backstories. Over and over in the series, characters are given second chances and a chance to be better. In the third season, a writer becomes part of the cast – he is writing a book about Ted and his strange, but effective ways of coaching (and loving) the players. As the season ends, he offers a draft of the book to Ted to read. It is titled, “The Lasso Way”. In the end, Ted leaves the draft back on the writer’s desk with the note on the cover page, “It isn’t about me. It never was.” And viewers see that the title is changed to “The Richmond Way”.

In that pivot of Jesus’ question, “But who do you say that I am?” we are invited to ponder that for ourselves – who do you say Jesus is? Hear that question as an invitation to live into the grace and love of God who invites us all into new life, worrying less about ourselves and living into the grace, compassion and freedom that comes in setting our eyes on Jesus and following him. It isn’t about us. And thankfully, graciously, Jesus offers second (and third and fourth and on and on) chances to live into God’s grace. And in that realization, there is freedom to live extravagantly, with abandon and joy, sharing and living into Gospel love! Amen.