



The Westminster Pulpit

Sermons Preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church
3900 West End Avenue Nashville, Tennessee 37205-1899

“What are people saying about you?” **Sermon on Matthew 16:13-20**

Donovan A. Drake

August 27, 2023

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?’ ¹⁴And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ ¹⁵He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ ¹⁷And 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. ¹⁸And 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. ¹⁹I 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.’ ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Jesus has an interest in what people were saying about him. Doesn’t that sound like a rather human side of Jesus? I would think God would know exactly what people are saying about him.

But Jesus wants to know, “Hey! What’s the word on the street about me?” And that’s a very human question, indeed. What people say about us has a powerful impact on how we live our lives. In fact, we will become someone we’re not in order to be what others want us to be. Now, you may say, “That’s not true. I’m not someone who bends to the desires of others. I am who I am.”

Maybe! But let’s say some higher power could take a sharp knife and cut along your property line, pull up your home with you and your family in it, and drop it all in Iowa - Lenox, Iowa. Population 1,300. And let’s just say you had no choice but to live there for the rest of your life.

Chances are that once you have a healthy grip on your depression, you may actually venture out the door and seek some human interaction. Now, the first thing that's going to happen is that the town folks there are going to look at you and your belongings, your house and say, "You're not from around here." And you're going to look at them and say, "You got that right!" But remember, you're sentenced there for the rest of your life, and as they say at the Shawshank Prison, you either get busy living or you get busy dying.

You choose living.

And before you know it, you've sold your car and you're driving a Chevy, prefer red Jell-o over green, and on a Friday night you're at the public-school football game, the ninth man in the stands for the eight-man football team, and you're drinking pop. Otherwise, you're not from around here. On Sunday, you'll be sharing your "joys and concerns" in the Presbyterian Church in worship. In the summer, you'll book your vacation around the rodeo days at the end of July, and when your tomatoes ripen. You'll play golf wearing jeans and a T-shirt, drink a beer and clean your own clubs while the charcoal briquettes heat up at the clubhouse.

Now, that's not you! But it would be you, if that's what happened to you, if you were sentenced to live in Lenox, Iowa. If you didn't try to fit in, you'd be the talk of the town, you'd have no friends, and your life would just get worse and worse and worse. See, people transform us; they move us into something we're not, but then after a while, we are. If you still don't believe me, read your history books. Look at the people of Germany back in the 1920s and 30s – they became people they were not because they had to fit in, they had to walk the lockstep walk.

Who do people say that I am? I still remember the mother whose life became so painful. She could not keep up with her group of friends because their children moved so well through the education process, and her child had a learning disability. Life was not perfect; life was hard. And it's hard to live in West Nashville if you're not perfect. And guess what, folks? We're not perfect. Life is hard for each and every one of us. But rather than share it, we seek to conform to the people around us.

Jesus heard that people thought he was Elijah, John the Baptist, or one of the prophets. People thought he was religious. Do people say that of you? Is that the first thing they talk about when they talk about you? I get that when I'm dressed up like this, but most of the time people don't recognize me as religious. As the woman at Kroger's said to me, "Oh, Donovan, I didn't recognize you with your clothes on." You don't want to say that too loudly in Kroger's. I knew what she meant.

What do people say about you? Do they lead with your profession? Your personality? What? Do they say anything about your faith in God?

Well, with Jesus, the word on the street was that he was definitely religious. They got that right about him. But they hadn't nailed him down yet. They will. Not because they knew who he was, but because they couldn't make him into what they were. "Who do people say that I am?" "Congratulations Jesus, you're one of us. You look like us. You vote like us. You believe like us." It never happened. Jesus wasn't going to be conformed to the world.

Remember how the story goes? After Jesus asked, "Who do people say that I am?," he followed it up with another question. "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." And Jesus blessed him for his testimony. But ten verses later, Jesus rebukes Peter because Peter refused to let Jesus be Jesus. "You're not going to die! You're not going to Jerusalem! We're not handing you over to the Pharisees! I forbid it!" And Jesus, who just praised Peter, says, "Get behind me, Satan!"

The temptation is to take Jesus and make him just like us.

My ordained ministry has been during a time in which the church has struggled to survive. You can't die, you have to survive! One of the things the church has been really good at is surveys. What do you want? Do you want different music? Do you want better seating? Do you want better coffee? Do you want a word that will make you feel better and make you a success? Do you need a waterslide for your kids? We can do that! What do you want? Because we need to fill this place in order to survive. The survey says: "Be conformed to the world."

Can you imagine Jesus sending out a survey? And the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that the Lord has made known to us." And there in a manger was a survey and a free Starbucks gift card upon completion. I mean, what do you want?

I read an article by a "none" a "N-O-N-E" just the other day. NONE is the fastest-growing group of folks who used to go to church, but now they claim "none." They're spiritual but not religious. This article was about someone who grew up in the church and left the church, but needs the church, and wants a church, so he gave conditions for coming back to church. I just find that fascinating.

I used it in my Sunday school time last week as an image of salvation. The picture was of a person drowning in a torrent of water, but there was a guy hanging from a rope and chain in a helicopter reaching out for that hand. Do you know what happened next? Instead of a hand, the rescuer received an envelope that contained a document entitled, "Ten Things that I Need in my Savior." Come on!

We are in a re-visioning time in this church. I think this needs to be a time to get a vision not of what we want, but a vision of who God is. This is a time of prayer. It is a time of getting into the Word and seeking to hear who God wants us to be. And seeing again that God is the great "I am who I am," and that is not up for negotiation. It is a

time when we realize that God grants salvation in the form of one who was born in the manger in the middle of nowhere, and that is the king of Kings, the lord of Lords. You know, I would have come up with a better idea than that, but that's the one we have.

It is a time to see that God gives us abundant life in one who did not invest in the corruption of the politics of the day, did not invest in the economic worries, did not invest in a popular vote, did not invest in the division between Jews and Greeks, but invested those who need to be saved from all of that. Invested in radical, sacrificial love.

And the vision is that we are to do the same!

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect."

I suppose if some higher power could take a sharp knife and pull you and your household up and drop you in Lenox, Iowa, then after you got over your depression, you might want to conform to that world in Lenox, Iowa. You might sit down for breakfast at the Tiger Den with an Iowa State hat on your head, and further develop your opinion on how the Farm Bill isn't a form of socialism. I suspect you will conform to that world.

But when it's all said and done, and you've lived your life in that town, after the preacher prays words over your grave, and everyone returns to the church fellowship hall to eat Made-Rite, pickles, corn, Jell-o, and chips, your friends will be there. And if that's a tear in their eye, it's there because you transformed them into seeing the will of God. You were an answer to prayer. You gave without wanting anything in return. You were like family. You were a savior in the nick of time. You were a living sacrifice. You were like Jesus. And that's what people would say about you in Lenox, Iowa. But I suppose they could say that about you here, too.

Lord, what do you say about me? Have you ever asked that question? Lord, what do you say about me?

"You are my child, my beloved, in you I am well pleased."