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Series: Wandering Hearts: Figuring Out Faith with Peter

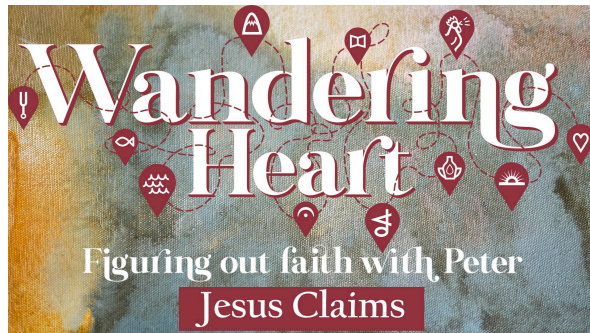
Sermon Title: Jesus Claims

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Text: [Matthew 16:13-20](#)

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Imagine for a moment, maybe you can remember a time when you are sitting in a class or training. The instructor is going over a difficult topic and you, along with everyone else, is struggling to keep up, struggling to really understand what is going on. And then the instructor asks the class a question and says that they are going to call on someone to answer the question. Just thinking about it makes me sweat just a bit.

This is where Peter finds himself as we pick up his story today in our sermon series called *Wandering Heart: Figuring Out Faith with Peter*. We are looking at Jesus' life through the experience of one of his closest friends and disciples, Peter. Peter is probably the most human of all the disciples, and we can often see our faith journey reflected in his faith journey.

Jesus and his disciples have traveled to Caesarea Philippi and it is a strange travel itinerary. It is a place that was quite a distance from the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus and the disciples are traveling from. It would have taken a couple of days on foot to make this journey north. And when Jesus said to them that they were going to take a trip up north to Caesarea Philippi, the disciples probably asked, "Why on earth would we do that?" It was a place of pagan worship, primarily where a God named Pan was worshiped at places of great natural beauty.

I describe this setting because it helps to bring home today's scripture text and the question that Peter and the other disciples are asked. They are sitting in the shadow of the shrines to the pagan God Pan and they have this conversation.

¹³ Now when Jesus came to the area of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Human One is?"

¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the other prophets.”

¹⁵ He said, “And what about you? Who do you say that I am?”

¹⁶ Simon Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:13-16)

Who do you say that I am? It’s the question, right. It’s like we are in a classroom or an office when a question outloud is asked and no one really has the courage to answer, you get the mumbling. No one wants to say anything that might be heard as a clear answer.

Until Peter speaks up and says, “You Are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

We began our pastors class last Sunday. We have 16 fifth- and sixth-graders preparing for a profession of faith and baptism. Every year when we start this class, it occurs to me that the profession of faith is probably more intimidating than the baptism. Because in a way, these students are answering this question from Jesus, “Who Do You Say I Am?”

In his autobiography *Brother to a Dragonfly*, Will Campbell recalls how his friend P.D. East kept badgering him for a succinct definition of Christianity. He said, “Keep it simple. In ten words or less, what’s the Christian message?”

Several years ago the magazine *The Christian Century* asked several authors and then later readers to describe the Gospel in seven words or less, their elevator speech of faith. They were challenged to capture what is distinctive and compelling about the Christian faith.

One person wrote “God, through Jesus Christ, welcomes you anyhow.” Other examples include: “In Christ, God’s yes defeats our no.” “In Christ, God calls all to reconciliation.” “We are the Church of Infinite Chances.” “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

If you get a moment or two, it is a worthy exercise. Try describing the Gospel in seven words or less. What is your elevator speech of the faith?

In a way, this is the question that Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do you say I am?” He wants them to make some claim about who he is. Where do I stand in this life we are doing together? What do I mean to you?

What would you say if Jesus asked you these questions?

Peter makes this powerful declaration because he recognizes something that others were struggling to recognize. So there in Caesara, named after the Roman emperor and in the shadow of a temple dedicated to Augustus, who had been hailed as the savior, the High Priest. He was the son of Julius Caesar, who had been declared a god as the Roman Emperor.

Peter boldly proclaims to Jesus, against the powers of the day, the powers that oppressed people, right in front of a shrine to the powers of the day, "You are the Christ, the son of the Living God."

Peter says, "You Jesus, your way of life, your way in the world, is the foundation upon which I desire to build my life."

We are all looking for a foundation for our life, a claim we can make that enables people to know what we are about. We are laying a foundation for our children, our grandchildren, and we desire to help others develop and grow. So we claim the way of Jesus. For me, that's just the beginning of the challenge.

What does it mean to proclaim Jesus as Christ?

Who has he been to you in the past?

Who is he now?

What does he mean for your future?

You might be thinking to yourself, "Why is he asking more questions rather than answering one?" It's because this profession Peter makes, like the professions we make, isn't the end of a journey. It is the beginning.

To lean into what we don't know is not to deny Jesus. Rather the questions are like drops of faithfulness in growing in what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus is present in your questions and doubts. We grow more by asking questions and having doubts instead of just assuming we have it all figured out.

If we are open to God's leading, that is something that God can work with.

As Peter recognizes Jesus as the Christ, makes his profession, something shifts. Peter proclaims Jesus, but Jesus also claims Peter for God's purposes:

Jesus came back, "God bless you, Simon, son of Jonah! You didn't get that answer out of books or from teachers. My Father in heaven, God himself, let you in on this secret of who I really am. And now I'm going to tell you who you are, really are. You are Peter, a rock. This is the rock on which I will put together my church, a church so expansive with energy that not even the gates of hell will be able to keep it out.

¹⁹ "And that's not all. You will have complete and free access to God's kingdom, keys to open any and every door: no more barriers between heaven and earth, earth and heaven. A yes on earth is yes in heaven. A no on earth is no in heaven." (Matthew 16:17-19)

I'm going to tell you who you are. Peter, the one who will backtrack, deny, lose the vision for the world God's dreams about, Jesus says you are the one upon which I will build my church.

There is this personal thing happening here. There are so many claims upon who we are. So many things are willing to give you an identity. So many entities are willing to deny your identity and who you are. Even the church has been complicit in that.

Here Peter hears the only identity he will need. The only identity you will need. Let me tell you who you are. In the doubts and the certainties, let me tell you who you are. Let me make a claim upon your life. A claim that never wavers. A claim that never fails.

I recently read a story about a woman who was alone. Very ill. And she was at home dying. It would be hard to overstate how depressed and discouraged she was feeling. A friend was so concerned that she called a pastor to come by and visit the woman. I can tell you from personal experience that it doesn't always work so well when somebody calls a minister to visit someone else.

The woman candidly told the pastor: "Look, I've made such a mess of my life. I've made so many mistakes. How could God ever forgive me?"

The pastor listened. He said to her, "God can forgive anyone. Anytime. We just have to trust it. Receive it. Let it come close to us."

The woman said, "I think I'm beyond believing it."

At that very moment the pastor happened to notice that on the woman's bedroom dresser was a beautiful picture of a young girl. She looked to be, maybe, 12 years old. He asked the woman, "Who is that little girl in the picture?"

And for the first time in the conversation the woman smiled. She said, "Oh, that's my daughter. She's the only beautiful thing I have left in my life."

The pastor said, "And if your daughter made some mistakes and did some things that were wrong and was hurting and broken, wouldn't you forgive her? Wouldn't you come close to her and still love her? Wouldn't you still want her to be in your life?"

The woman, whispering now, said: "Yes. Yes. Yes, of course."

And then that pastor made a wonderfully astute theological connection. He said, "I want you to know that God has a picture of *you* on God's dresser. And God still loves you. And you are not alone."

"Let me tell you who you are." This is Jesus' invitation to each of us—over and over again in love.

Let us pray.