

“More Than Words”

Matthew 16:13-20

Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer: God of light, your wisdom speaks to us in love. Open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to receive what you would teach us today. Amen.

In her piece three years ago in *The New York Times*, Jessica Grose pointed out something many of us have felt for a long time: Christianity has a branding problem.¹ A serious image problem—or, if you will, an identity crisis.

In a large reader survey, Grose found that many people with no church affiliation—the “nones”—haven’t necessarily lost interest in spiritual things. Some still miss church. Some still care deeply about questions of meaning, purpose, and faith. But they stay away because they feel like the church has become completely tied up with partisan politics. One reader put it bluntly: *“I no longer attend services, nor do I want to. I’m deeply troubled by some of the things being done in the name of Christianity and the effect they’re having on our children and society.”*

We live in a divided and fractured world. We hear the name of Jesus invoked in political arguments and public controversies, and often it feels as though everyone is using that name to defend a position, make a point, or win a debate. Because of that, many people, including members of our own families, have walked away from church entirely.

So when faith comes up in conversation, or when someone asks us what we believe, we freeze up. We hesitate. We don’t want to sound like a politician on television—evasive, spinning a narrative, or offering a polished soundbite. And we certainly don’t want to start an argument.

Yet Jesus doesn’t ask for a polished soundbite or a debate strategy. He simply asks for truth.

When Jesus took his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, he brought them into the heart of Roman power and Greco-Roman religious worship. Caesarea Philippi wasn’t a sleepy fishing village on the lake. The city, named after Caesar, sat against a giant cliff associated with the worship of the Greek

¹ Jessica Grose, “Christianity’s Got a Branding Problem,” *New York Times*, May 10, 2023.

god *Pan*, surrounded by Roman troops, religious shrines, and grand architecture. In the midst of this setting was a temple honoring Caesar Augustus, reflecting the Roman practice of honoring the emperor with titles such as “Lord” and “Son of God.”

Standing there in the shadow of imperial power, surrounded by competing claims of allegiance, Jesus asks two questions. The first one is easy enough: *“Who do people say that I am?”*

The disciples give him what they’ve been hearing in the crowds: *“Well, some say John the Baptist. Others think Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the old prophets returned.”* The people thought Jesus belonged in that long, brave line of God’s servants—prophets who risked everything to speak up for the vulnerable and call out injustice.

But then comes the second question—the one that cuts through all the cultural noise and personal hesitation: *“But who do YOU say that I am?”*

He’s saying: *“Forget what everyone else is saying. What about you? Why are you following me? Who do you believe I am?”*

Simon Peter answers: *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”*

That wasn’t just a casual answer. That word—*Messiah*—carried enormous weight. And it carried implications in a world shaped by Roman rule. Israel’s kings were anointed, and the hope for God’s Anointed One was deeply connected to the restoration of God’s people. In the shadow of Caesar’s temple, Peter was declaring that his ultimate allegiance belonged not to the powers of the world, but to the living God revealed in Jesus.

Jesus looks at him and says, *“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”*

For centuries, Christians have been divided over what “the rock” actually refers to—whether it’s Peter himself or his confession of faith. Catholics argued that Peter was the foundation, while Protestants insisted it was just Peter’s faith, pointing to subtle grammar differences between the Greek words *petros* and *petra*.² In Greek, Peter is *petros*, masculine, while rock is

² M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. VIII, Leander E. Keck, et al, eds (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 345.

petra, feminine. So, Jesus, they argued, couldn't have pointed to Peter as the "rock" upon which he would build the church.

The problem is Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Greek. In Aramaic, the words for "Peter" and "rock" are the same—*Kepha*. So Jesus was making a pun, a play on words, telling Peter, "Your name is "Rock," and on this 'rock" I will build my church."³

However, many scholars, especially Protestants, reject this view. They worry it gives Peter too much weight—and reinforces the Catholic claims that Peter was the very first pope.

Happily, modern scholars, in the spirit of ecumenism and unity, generally agree on the core point: Jesus is establishing a foundation for a living community, promising that even the forces of destruction and death won't be able to stop it.⁴ We should agree on core truths, allow freedom of opinion on debatable matters, and treat everyone with love and kindness in every situation, as the ecumenical motto goes: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." That's good news for us because we don't have to get bogged down in old arguments. We can focus on what Jesus actually promises metaphorically: he is building the church on a rock.

For a moment, think about what a rock actually represents. It's solid. Unshakable. It doesn't yield when everything around it shifts. In a world full of shifting arguments, political noise, and cultural pressure, Jesus says his church will be built on that kind of enduring strength.

And that brings us right back to our own lives on an ordinary Tuesday.

When Jesus asks us, "*Who do you say that I am?*" he isn't giving us a theology pop quiz, nor is he asking us to fix a "branding problem" or win a debate. He is asking how our faith shapes the way we live. We may not live under ancient Rome, but we face plenty of competing allegiances. Consumerism tells us our worth comes from what we own. Political division

³ Thomas G. Long, "Matthew," Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 186.

⁴ Cf. Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, and John Reumann, eds., *Peter in the New Testament* (Augsburg, 1973)

tempts us to see one another as enemies. Fear tells us to protect ourselves at all costs.

To confess Jesus as Messiah is to choose a different allegiance. Money is not God. Politics is not God. Fear does not rule us. Jesus is Lord.

Our confession, then, must be more than words. Our lives are our answer.

When we forgive, we build on the rock. When we serve, we build on the rock. When we stand with someone who is hurting, or refuse to let fear and division have the final word, we are answering Jesus' question with our lives.

You don't need a theology degree to answer him. You don't need to have every complex cultural argument figured out before you open your mouth. Answer him with honest words when faith comes up, sharing simply what brings you hope.

But above all, answer him through practice: by being generous, by forgiving someone who has hurt you, and by helping carry somebody else's burden. At the end of the day, a life of quiet, steady love is the best answer we can give.

May our words be honest, and may the way we live show that we mean them. Thanks be to God. Amen.