Text: Matthew 16:13-20

**Introduction**

One of the dangers of being the guy in the pulpit is the temptation to be the guy who offers all the answers.

Now if the answer you are offering is the Sunday School one – that’s “Jesus”. Even the most irregular Sunday School kid eventually learns that you could answer “Jesus” to any question and be mostly right. If the questions you are addressing you are willing to accept “Jesus”, ok. And there are certainly some questions where that is simply the answer and there is no other.

How have you been saved? By the blood of Jesus.

What is given freely in this sacrament? The blood of Jesus.

Are there wordier answers? Yes. Do we need them? Not really.

But then there are questions and situations – any Sunday school teacher knows this – where “Jesus” as the answer is nice and pious, but doesn’t feel sufficient. As a teacher, you are looking, hoping, for more.

And then there are some questions where if you are the teacher you are hoping your students will just accept “Jesus”. Because beyond that, you don’t have a great answer. Even if you’ve spent a good deal of time pondering.

**Trouble in the World**

Today, based on our gospel lesson, I want to talk about a subject that might be in that last category. I want to think about what we’d normally call conversion. How does one come to belief? And I’d add a modifier there – to authentic belief.

And this question presents itself to us – to the modern church – in something of a state of anxiety. Because the normal way that this happens has failed or at least not been as fruitful. That normal way was the remains of Christendom, the remains of the state church or in America the de facto establishment. Mother and Father would raise son and daughter in the faith. Boy would meet girl, marry, have kids, get them baptized, and just like Mom and Dad would dutifully teach their children the faith. The extended family would often be the great cloud of witnesses. The congregation was often an extended family reunion. And this is how it went.

How did one come to belief? Mom & Dad gave me Jesus.

Now I’m not going to lambaste the home as the means of conversion. Believe it or not the statistics even today will still tell you that Evangelical Protestantism – largely defined – retains roughly 75% of its kids later in life. The funny thing is that the great category of atheist or no-religion only retains about 65% of its kids. Most people are called to some type of spiritual reality.

There are three big problems with that home model of conversion in our current time. The first problem was simply 1.5 kids. When your demographic subset largely decided on 1.5 children, you shrink rather fast. The second and third problems are largely related. Where for lets say 1517 to 1964 people sweated the details on doctrine and belief, we largely stopped around there. And it’s not like prior to 1517 they didn’t care – but we’ll get there. And large portions of the church just kinda gave up the teaching mission. When Jesus told the apostles to make disciples, baptizing and teaching. The mainline churches and large amounts of the Roman Catholic world just decided they didn’t need to. Two generations on, you have dead communions and lots of “nones – no particular religion”. The third problem then is living next to a black hole of faith isn’t easy. The Evangelical Church may have been much more successful at least treading water, it has largely done it often by shedding its institutional forms and the more specific teaching. Being specific about doctrine – like saying we believe, teach and confess the creeds, the small catechism and the Book of Concord – often loses out to if not none to non as in non-denomination.

The home is still foundational. But the modern church in its geographic core is faced with the question of conversion in a way that it hasn’t thought deeply about since probably the early middle ages. There are people who have thought deeply. Pastor Eriksen having served as a foreign missionary could tell some I imagine. But that wisdom on conversion needs to be brought from the periphery to the core. As well as something of a remembering.

**Gospel**

What is required in conversion?

This is far from an answer. It isn’t even what I’d call deep thinking. What I hope it is is two things. First, the ok to talk about these things from a standpoint of weakness. Admitting we don’t know, we need to find out, and we are going to make mistakes. Admitting that we need divine help. We need Jesus. And we need Jesus in the way that when we are weak, He is strong. And that will be the second part. It is only from that place of weakness that we can find our hope. Even when steeples are falling, the Church shall stand. Not in temples made with hands, but in in these living stones.

So in our gospel text you could say that the full extent of the Kingdom has been revealed. Jesus has been throughout Galilee and the village of Judea preaching and healing and culminating in the feeding of the 5000. Where he deftly escaped the worldly crown, yet walked on the water. He’s healed the Canaanite woman’s daughter and after that fed the 4000. It’s a parallel feeding miracle, but the audience for that one included a bunch of gentiles. The Kingdom is for everyone.

But this is a question of conversion. Are his own disciples converted? And what does that mean?

Jesus starts with the question: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

And the disciples collectively tell him “John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the other prophets.”

As part of conversion one has to recognize the Son of Man – this Jesus – as true man. And we have to recognize him in a way that makes sense to us. If in the story of Jesus we cannot recognize an authentic humanity, we aren’t going to get too far. And I honestly wonder if this isn’t part of our problem. If we asked this question of “the nones” what would that say about Jesus? What should be hope they would say? How can we tell the story of Jesus such that they would want to answer with a Spiritual Hero? How much of this problem is that our culture doesn’t even have a category of spiritual hero? Can we ourselves be human, let alone recognize the true man, without that category?

A sympathy with Jesus as true man is necessary, but it isn’t sufficient. Neither is a merely cultural acceptance. Having the church – as everyone in the United States in say 1940 had the church – is not having Jesus. What started to happen soon after is proof of leaning on the church and its sociology instead of Jesus. Because Jesus hears their answers and makes it personal. “Who do you say I am?” We can say that at large we need Jesus, and we do. But the deeper truth is that I need Jesus. This Son of Man has to in my heart.

And in Peter’s answer we have the second part of conversion. It is not enough to have sympathy with the true man. If Jesus was just another Elijah or Jeremiah or one of the prophets, that’s good. But that isn’t the claim of the Kingdom.

Peter makes the full confession of the converted. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Convinced of the true man, Peter confesses the True God. The True God who has acted in history.

Conversion requires the confession. There is a reason that the old church sweated the details on doctrine. This is what we believe, teach and confess. Because real conversion requires confession. The church is built on this rock – the rock of the confession.

**A Wrinkle**

But there is a problem with this. Or before we think we can make a nice church program out of this we need to hear the rest. “Blessed are you Simon Bar-Jonah! For Flesh and Blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”

The Spirit blows when and where it wills. We the rain falls from heaven, blessed are you! The Spirit proceeds from the Father. Pray to the Lord of the Harvest.

We – the church, families – can lay the proper ground work. We can talk about Jesus in ways that present him as the true man. We can proclaim Jesus is ways that the world might recognize that we are talking about God. Which might be a good question, how does our non-Christian world talk about God. They certainly do talk about God. We can’t avoid it. But do we recognize how it does? And how could we present Jesus as God in a way that is a better and more full fulfillment of what they think. I’m pushing time here, otherwise I’d share a fascinating example of maybe the last time this was done in the core, when the Franks conquered the pagan Saxons. But for right now I’d ask you too keep your ears open. How do people talk about God? It might even be is the things we refuse to talk about.

Doing this work is necessary, but conversion itself ultimately is outside of our hands.

But we do have a promise. “The gates of hell will not prevail.”

Ok God, you’ve made a promise. Are you going to just turn us over? Is your name going to be a by-word among the nations? Are you going to allow them to continue to laugh at those fools who have believed in you?

Or are you going to send the Spirit?

We repent of not taking things seriously. We repent of not teaching your name in all its fullness. But without your Spirit, we die. “You are Christ, the Son of the living God.” Restore us.