

On Friday I brought the synod's newest pastor to the Central v. Bellefonte football game. The majority of the youth in her congregation are Bellefonte students—but I did make her sit in the visitors section with us, Go Dragons. Although her new congregation is almost as far north as you can go in the synod, her ordination service was almost as far south as you can go in the synod, at her home church. It was meaningful for the people who raised her in the faith, who saw her baptism and confirmation, and helped foster her call to ministry to be among the first people to call her “pastor.” *Location, location, location* truly does matter.

Not by accident, Matthew sets today's gospel scene in Caesarea Philippi, which is sort of in the middle of nowhere and not really on the way to anything—a hint that Jesus didn't have a practical purpose for bringing the disciples there, but a spiritual purpose. Caesarea Philippi was located at the base of Mount Hermon, where a tributary of the Jordan River flows from a cave in the rock. Ancient pagans worshipped there because it really does look as if it could be the place where life began. The Greeks worshipped the god Pan there. Herod the Great's son Philip founded the Roman city there, so it was named for him, *Caesarea Philippi*, not to be confused with the many other cities named for Caesar. Rome's national religion ascribed divine authority to the emperors, so Jesus' contemporaries would have worshiped Caesar there.

It is at this multicultural, interfaith crossroads that Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” They answer “John the Baptist” or “Elijah” or “Jeremiah or one of the prophets”... The disciples suggest these pillars of faith in Israel's history or, in the case of John the Baptist, Israel's current chaos, but they name them with the backdrop of the Roman imperial cult, the shrine to Pan, and centuries of pagan worship looming large. It is as if Jesus has laid out all the possible options for how people perceive God before he asks them, “But who do *you* say that *I* am?”

Simon Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” This was after Jesus fed 5,000 people, walked on water, rescued Peter from his attempt to walk on water, healed a bunch of people, and then fed another crowd of 4,000; yet Jesus pronounces Simon Peter “blessed” for his answer because it wasn't the flesh and blood things Peter witnessed that revealed this truth to him, but the Father. We'll find out next week that Peter doesn't yet fully understand what it means that Jesus is the Messiah, but at least for now, he has excelled at this multiple choice test.

Jesus vows to build the church on Peter's confession and to give him the keys of the kingdom. This is why Peter is considered the first pope and is usually pictured in sacred art with a set of keys—or pictured in modern cartoons checking the guest list behind the podium at the pearly gates. Yet it was Peter who tried walking on water and sank (like a rock), whose very

next conversation ends with Jesus saying “Get behind me Satan”, who cut off a slave’s ear with a sword, and who denied even knowing Jesus after his arrest. This is the one whose confession Jesus builds the church upon, not because *he’s* perfect, but because he recognizes that *Jesus* is the Son of the living God. In John’s gospel, Jesus refers to Peter as *Simon, son of John*; but here he refers to him as *Simon, son of Jonah*. It could be that Peter’s father went by either name, or that a scribe messed up somewhere along the way. Or it could be that in contrast to Jesus, the holy Son of God, Peter is the flawed son of Jonah, the prophet who ran away when God called him. Whenever you worry that you’re not the best or the brightest, remember that Jesus chose the disciple who gets the most verses because he messes up the most.

The question that Jesus asks the disciples is really a question for us as well. Who do *we* say that Jesus is? A fiery prophet like John the Baptist, urging people to repent and calling the religious experts a brood of vipers? A miracle worker like Elijah who hunts down the leaders of a false religion? A prophet like Jeremiah—the traditional author of Lamentations—who weeps over the state of God’s people and reminds them again and again that they have strayed from God’s calling? A ruler like Caesar who establishes his kingdom through the power of the state? A pagan deity who would control the natural world and personal fortunes if they were worshipped according to the right formula? All of those answers are tied to this specific story, but you probably also know people who would say: Jesus was primarily a sacrifice for sin. Or Jesus was a good guy—maybe the most enlightened teacher ever—but not divine. Who we say Jesus is matters, because our answer determines who we try to be when we try to be his disciples.

If Jesus is the *Messiah*—which means God’s anointed or chosen one—and Jesus is the Son of the living God, then Jesus is the one whose life gives us the best example of how God wants us to live: feeding the hungry, healing the sick, restoring outcasts to community, serving the poor, lifting up the lowly, forgiving enemies, loving neighbors, challenging the use of religion to justify punishing, excluding, or oppressing others instead of caring for, encouraging, and liberating them. Will we be perfect in following that example? No, of course not. But Jesus built the church out of people like Peter, son of Jonah, the prophet who had to spend three days in a fish before he agreed to do what God told him to do. We have inherited Peter’s imperfect discipleship, but the part that he got right was the Jesus is the Son of the living God. May we experience God living in us by following the Son who forgives us and loves us, and calls us to do the same.