

“You are the one”
Matthew 16:13-20
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A friend attended a conference with religious leaders from various denominations, backgrounds, and traditions. Suffice it to say some attendees were more expressive of their feelings than your typical Presbyterian. Apparently, there were plenty of shouts of “Amen!” When the speakers got on a roll, they would be encouraged with a steady chorus of, “Preach it! Preach it!” When someone spoke a particularly powerful word of truth, there were deep affirmations from ones who said, “Alright then! Alright then!” But my friend who attended the conference said there was no one to compare to this one particular individual. When someone nailed it, when someone got it just right, when someone found the sweet spot, this fellow would jump out into the middle of the aisle, and he would start winding up his arm, round and round and round, and then when the energy had built to a critical mass, he would thrust his arm out, with his finger pointed, right at the preacher, and you knew that a word from the Lord had been spoken.

One day Jesus and his disciples had a little conference. They went to a retreat center in the region of Caesarea Philippi. Jesus got up to speak to his gathered disciples. They were really on board with him by this point, so when he came to the front to address them those disciples gave him a warm round of applause. He began his little speech with a question. “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” One of the twelve shouted out, “Some say John the Baptist!” That drew several “Amens!” Then another chimed in, “Others say Elijah.” Things were heating up and it was fitting when the chorus began, “Preach it! Preach it!” Now it was like roll call. We heard John the Baptist, we heard Elijah, next we heard “Jeremiah!” and then, “Or one of the prophets!” Like a low rumble the twelve started saying together, “Alright then! Alright then!” The man up front, the man who asked the question, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” the man named Jesus let the energy build until the time was just right and then he

said, “But what about you? Who do you say I am?” And good old Simon Peter hopped out into the aisle, and he started winding up. He started winding up his arm, swinging round and round, building speed, swept up in the emotion, and when the energy had reached a critical mass he thrust his arm out, with his finger pointed right at Jesus, and he said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Although I love the idea that Peter might have literally got all wound up when he made that powerful declaration, the reality is the emotion and energy Peter had does not really add to or detract from the impact of this story. Whether Peter’s words were stated matter-of-factly with little to no emotion or whether his declaration was made with wild-eyed enthusiasm, the factor that determines the importance of this story is how Jesus reacts to what Peter says. When Peter says, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” Jesus embraces that declaration of faith. “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by human beings, but by my Father in heaven.” An insight like this, an awakening of faith such as Peter experiences, this is not a human insight. This is a divine revelation. In God’s grace, God allows Peter to see who Jesus really is.

Just because our passage of scripture does not ever say Peter wound up and pointed at Jesus, that does not mean it did not happen. I have read in numerous publications about a painting Karl Barth kept in a prominent place. The painting was by Matthias Grunewald. In the painting John the Baptist is holding the Scriptures, and with the Scriptures in his hand he is pointing to Jesus. Barth is credited with saying that as a Christian, our job is to be the finger of John the Baptist, always pointing to Jesus. So maybe Peter did point his finger right at Jesus when he said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

The Scriptures certainly do that very thing. First and foremost, the Scriptures point to God. The Scriptures point to God because God has revealed himself. Because God has revealed himself we are able to see God. Psalms 104 and 105 do a lot of finger pointing. In Psalm 104 the author is swept up in the wonder of nature. Caught up in drama of all that

surrounds us the psalmist points to how God has stretched the heavens like a tent, how God rides on the wings of the wind, how God has set the foundations of the earth and covered the deep, how at God's rebuke the waters flee and then flow down from the mountains, how God causes the grass to grow and the flowers to bloom, how plants yield food...there is a beautiful description of wine that gladdens the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread to sustain his heart (Psalm 104:15)...the trees and the birds, the lion that roars for his prey...the psalmist sees all of the vast and marvelous creation and the psalmist points at God...God did all this.

Psalm 105 continues the theme of pointing toward God, except now the emphasis shifts from God's actions as Creator to God's work as Redeemer and Sustainer. In Psalm 105 we are pointed to names that have great significance, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, we are told of Joseph who was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers...in Psalm 105 we read, "...Joseph was sold as a slave. They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons, till what he foretold came to pass, till the word of the Lord proved him true." In Psalm 105 God has moved beyond directing the movement of planets and stars, rivers and streams, days and nights. Now God is directing human history. Joseph rises to power. Israel settles in Egypt. A new Pharaoh arises who does not remember Joseph, Israel is enslaved. A deliverer is raised up, a prophet named Moses. Now God acts through the plagues that came upon Egypt, including the one where God "struck down all the firstborn in their land...and he brought Israel out." God is the God of the Exodus, the Deliverer. In the wilderness God gave bread from heaven, water from the rock, even guiding the steps of his children with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Psalm 105 points a big, bony finger at God as God has acted in history, to say, "God did all this."

The pages of the Old Testament are filled with stories of what God has done. The pages of the Old Testament point at God and say, "God did all this." There is also a major portion of the Old Testament that points forward. A major thrust of the Old Testament is to point toward the future.

The Old Testament not only tells us what God has done. The Old Testament tells us what God is still yet to do. In simplest form God promised he would send the Messiah to save the people, to redeem the people, to establish his kingdom, to make all things new.

Lest we miss the point of what happened when Peter pointed at Jesus on that glorious day at Caesarea Philippi, the Gospels clearly point to Jesus as being the Messiah. Matthew chapter one has a serious case of the pointing finger. We are told Jesus is the son of David, the son of Abraham, and by the time the angel is done speaking to Joseph we know Jesus has been conceived in the womb of Mary by no less than the Holy Spirit. Just to make sure we understand where all this is pointing, we are told to call him Immanuel, which means God is with us. At his baptism the voice of God that speaks from heaven points clearly at Jesus. “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

The gospels point to Jesus as having power over nature, power to calm the storm, power to walk on the water, power to multiply loaves and fishes. The gospels point to Jesus as being God’s special agent of healing and wholeness. When Jesus forgives the sins of the man who was brought to him on a mat because he could not walk, the religious leaders point at Jesus and say, “You cannot do that. Only God can forgive sins.” They point at Jesus and what they wanted to call blasphemy we call blessing. Because Jesus is the Son of God, because Jesus is God with us, Jesus is able to forgive sin, and to forgive it completely.

Ah, the signs point to Jesus, the signs point to Jesus, the signs point to Jesus, and one day at Caesarea Philippi the message hit home for Peter. Peter got it. God revealed it to Peter. God opened Peter’s eyes. God opened Peter’s heart. God gave Peter the gift of faith. “Who do you say I am?” Peter got all wound up. Peter wound up and the energy built until he could no longer contain it. Then he shot his arm straight out with a force that was not to be denied. His arm sprung forward with his finger extended and he pointed directly at Jesus and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Peter's confession captures what is without a doubt the central purpose in the gospels. The gospels are so bold as to say the Creator of the heavens and the earth, the architect and designer of all the historical works that add up to the history of Israel, this very God has wrapped himself in the flesh of a human being and in him and him alone is to be found salvation, forgiveness, healing, hope, resurrection, and the promise of eternal life. It is all right there in Jesus. Jesus is where Scripture in its entirety points. God's desire for all of his children is that we might look at Jesus and say, "I know who you are. You are the one."

I read somewhere years ago a story I cannot find, but I remember it as clear as day. A missionary was sent to the farthest reaches of China. There he met a young girl and shared with her about Jesus, about the love of Jesus, the power of Jesus, his kindness, his compassion, his concern for all of his children. The young girl listened carefully, fascinated by the story of Jesus. When the missionary was done telling about Jesus the young girl, "I have known him all my life. Now I know his name." Something about that little story touches the deepest places in my heart. All the things that inspire wonder and awe, every sunset and sunrise, the crashing waves of the ocean, the bright colors and choruses of birds, the gentle breeze, the flashes of lightning and peals of thunder, because the Scriptures point to Jesus we can say, "I know who you are. You are the one! You are the Lord of heaven and earth."

You are the one! To look at Jesus and be able to say that, to point at Jesus and to say that, "I know who you are, you are the one, you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God", to be able to look at Jesus and to say, "You are the one," that ability to point at Jesus and say those words is literally the whole point of the gospels.

You are the one! One day when our kids were really young Julie had the two girls with her at our house. Hayley was only three or four, which means Carlee was two years at the oldest. Out of the blue Hayley said to Julie, "Mom, look at Carlee, she's on the neighbor's roof." Julie's head spun around in a flash. Sure enough, our little girl, all of two years at the

most, had snuck out of our house, climbed the neighbor's fence, crawled along the top of that fence, made her way up onto a roof next to their garage, and was now on the edge of that roof looking down at a swimming pool. In seconds Julie had duplicated that impressive feat and was clutching her little girl to her chest and saying prayers of thanksgiving for a disaster averted. Back in the house, when things had calmed down, Julie thanked Hayley for watching her little sister. As Julie tells it, Hayley put her hands on her hips and said in a semi-bossy tone, "I wasn't watching her at all. Jesus just told me, 'Hayley, look at your sister over on the roof.'" Oh, okay...I know who you are, you are the one who whispers in the ears of little girls and gets their attention so they can send out an alert and rescue a baby sister who was in a situation of great peril.

A couple of years ago we traveled to Houston where I officiated at a wedding for a family friend. He happened to be a best friend of our son Alex, so Alex was in the wedding party. When the tuxedos arrived, Alex tried his on and instead of a size 32 pant they had given him a size 42. No problem. I grabbed our family friend with whom we were staying and made a quick trip to the rental shop. We explained the situation and they said they would rectify it. In fact, a truck was arriving within 10 minutes that would have pants of the size 32 Alex needed. The truck did not arrive in ten minutes. Not in an hour and ten minutes. The truck did not arrive for three hours. And when the truck did arrive the pants were the wrong size. Now they were too small. Alex said don't worry, he would make it work. That night at the wedding Alex squeezed into pants two sizes too small and made the best of it. He actually had a blast. He danced with such energy and enthusiasm he split the pants. He makes the best of a bad situation and we all had a good laugh.

The next day he felt a soreness in his lower groin area. He attributed it to the pants being so small. His wife said not so fast. You better get this checked out. That was when he was diagnosed with testicular cancer. Without those pants being so small, and him being so silly, he might not have discovered the cancer until much later. I know who you are...you are the one who uses mistakes in life and tuxedos two sizes too small and

inconveniences like waiting three frustrating hours at a store all just to get a beloved son the medical attention he needs and a surgery only a week later that removed all the cancer.

My dad was sick with the disease that would take his life. He was no longer able to move, confined to a bed and the chair he sat in. He had not spoken in weeks. I was living in Texas at the time and with some friends we traveled to California for a conference. The conference was close enough to my hometown that we all paid a visit on my dad. It was a tender moment. We gathered around him to pray. I said the words to the 23rd Psalm. Then one of the men started singing “Amazing Grace.” Remember, my dad had not spoken for weeks. He had not said a single word the whole time we visited with him. But when we started singing “Amazing Grace”, I heard the sweetest sound. I heard my dad’s voice. He who could not talk was still able to sing. What a priceless gift to know the last words I heard from the mouth of my father were, “Amazing grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.” I know who you are. You are the one who takes single moments in time and fills them with incomprehensible joy, joy that can sustain a human heart through the most painful loss and the deepest valley of sadness.

My stories are personal today, because I believe in one way or another God wants to give us all a personal sense of his love, a personal sense of his presence, a personal sense of his peace, a personal relationship with Jesus Christ that will fill our hearts and souls with the wonder of the God who is Immanuel.

Sometime in high school I started to read the bible every night. I only read the gospel stories, the stories about Jesus. Everything else was too hard to understand. But the stories of Jesus, I liked those a lot. Growing up, I was fortunate to see many wonders of God’s creation, from the desolate deserts of Death Valley to the soaring mountains and cascading waterfalls of Yosemite, from the crashing waves of the Pacific Oceans to the amazing tide pools that held an abundance of life in each

little crack and crevice. I witnessed the marvel of creation, from meteor showers to giant redwoods that were thousands of years old. As I would read about Jesus I started to realize the bible was saying this carpenter from Nazareth had something to do with all the wonders of creation, and that his death on the cross was an event greater than any other human event. I was learning about Jesus, but I cannot say I knew who Jesus was. Not personally. Not in a way that made a difference in my life.

And then my life collapsed. I was 19 years old, my first year out of high school. All the friends I grew up with went away to college. I stayed home and rode a commuter bus to the next town over where there was a community college. I spent my day surrounded by thousands of students and yet not knowing anyone. I was lonely. I went to class, but I didn't have an interest in what I studied. I tried out for sports, but I was too slow or too short to make the team. That same year my two brothers had moved away, one to Kenya with the Peace Corps and the other to attend college at a state university. I missed them terribly. I was hurting.

Day after day I would get on a bus that went back and forth to the next town so I could attend college. Every day I went back and forth on the bus, but in reality, I was going nowhere. I was lost. I kept reading about Jesus, but I did not know who he was. At my lowest and loneliest time, sitting on that bus, depressed and discouraged, sitting all by myself, I realized one day I was not alone. Someone was sitting next to me. If you saw me back then, you would see I was still sitting alone. I was all by myself. But that was no longer the truth. Somehow, I realized I was not sitting alone. I realized Jesus was with me. I realized Jesus was by my side. More than that I realized he knew me. I realized he cared for me. I realized he wanted to be with me and to lead me and to help me find my way in life, my meaning, my purpose.

I cannot pinpoint the exact day it happened, but there came a moment when I said to Jesus, "I know who you are. You are the one who healed all those people in the bible. You are the one who walked on water and turned fed the multitudes." As soon as I said that I realized something

else. So I said, “And you are the one who gave his life on the cross so our sins could be forgiven and we could have eternal life.” I know who you are. You are the one. You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

Part of me wishes I could tell you that at that very moment I started to wind up my arm, building the energy, capturing the enthusiasm, winding up so that I could thrust my arm toward Jesus and point my finger and say, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Part of me wishes I could tell you something dramatic like that. But what really did happen is pretty special to me. I simply reached out my arms to him and said, “I know who you are. You are the one. Would you come and make your home in my heart?” His answer was yes. And my life has never been the same.