

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 4-20-2021



Dear Friends in Christ,

ONE AT ONE – Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, April 20, you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for an end to gun violence in our country. Ask God to lead us toward solutions that protect people both from threat and from the violence that can come from guns. Pray for healing and comfort for those who have been the victims of gun crimes. Pray that God will show us God's will in this time of increasing injury and death from these weapons.

As I said before, Jesus asked lots of questions, and most if not all of those questions were not just for those to whom He spoke directly. They are for all of us. They may have been asked in a different time and context, but the heart of those questions can challenge us, speak to us, clarify for us, and reveal God's will for us. But they require us to dig deeper to see where God is taking us.

In Matthew 16:13-20 we hear that Jesus took His disciples to the region of Caesarea Philippi. While there, Jesus asked them an important question, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus praised Peter for his answer and said that "on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hell will not overcome it."

The area of Caesarea Philippi is the headwaters of the Jordan River, which flow down through Lake Huleh, into and out of the Sea of Galilee, and finally on to the Dead Sea. There is a large cave called the Cave of Pan at Caesarea from whence come the waters. Below the entrance to the cave the ground slopes steeply to a great depth, at the bottom of which is a small lake. This was thought to be the entrance to Hades, or the "gates of Hell." A temple was built just outside the entrance dedicated to the god Pan. Near that is another structure, thought to be the

Augusteum—a palace or temple to Augustus the emperor, who was believed to be a god because, of course, you don't get to be emperor without being a god. Additionally, small temples were erected nearby for the worship of Pan, Zeus, Nemesis, and the “dancing goats.” It was here that Pan would play his pipes to entice the goats to dance and make fertility assured, as well as for activities of sex, lust, and bestiality—a Middle Eastern “sin city.” Indeed, there were plenty of gods to worship at Caesarea Philippi.

Though the rabbis had forbade good Jews to come to here, Jesus brought His disciples to this place. While here, He asked them, “Who do people say that I am?” “What do others believe about Me?” is the meaning behind that first question. “What are you hearing from others?” After they share somethings that they've heard, Jesus asks them that most important question, “Who do you say that I am?”

It's significant that Jesus asks the question here, in this hotbed of pagan gods. He wants His disciples to recognize that there are many false gods out there that one can choose to worship. The answer to His question, “Who do you say that I am?” or “What do you believe about Me?” says something about our priorities and commitments. There are a lot of things that we can (and often do) worship today. Wealth. Possessions. Relationships. Political loyalties. Nationalism. Work. Alcohol. Drugs. Sex. Television programs. Leisure activities. The list goes on and on. Who do you say that Jesus is, and who do you say that He is in relationship to all of these other gods?

If we, like Peter, say that Jesus is our God and Savior, what we are saying is that there is nothing and no one more important than Jesus in our lives. And not just on Sundays. Every day. To say that Jesus takes priority over everything and everyone else changes things for us. It will make our choices—how we spend our time, our wealth, our energy—everything we do different from what other do and what we may have done in the past. But it is also important to understand what our answer means for the Kingdom of God. When Jesus said to Peter, “on this rock I will build my church,” He was not saying that Peter was the rock (though “Peter” literally translates to “rock”). It is Peter's statement that Jesus is saying is the bedrock for His church. If we make that statement of faith in Jesus as the Son of God and truly show it in the ways that we live our lives, Jesus will use our confession to further build His church and God's Kingdom. Our confession and how it is lived out will be the foundation upon which Jesus' church is established.

It wasn't just a question for back then. It is a question for today and for each of us. And our answer will have profound meaning for us and for God's Kingdom. Who do you say that Jesus is?

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey