

Sermon Text: Matthew 16: 13-20

During the Gulf War, the first Gulf War, I was once getting on a flight to travel on an overseas mission trip. I'm smart like that. A young security guard stopped one of our team, and pulled out a battery-powered drill. Now these battery powered drills were uncommon at that time, and it looked a little bit like a gun on the x-ray machine, so she pulled it out and examined the drill, and accidentally pulled the trigger, and didn't expect there to be power to it, but it went bzzzzz, and it scared her very badly. Now, what happened next, I believe was divinely inspired, she did what some people do, and we consider it rude and maybe vulgar, she uttered Jesus' name more as an exclamation rather than in proper, prayerful devotion. When she dropped the drill, and she yelled out, "Jesus," one of our group, a guy named Sonny, as country as anybody, as plainspoken as anybody has ever been, when she yelled out, "Jesus," Sonny said, "That's who we work for, and we ain't dangerous. Now, let us on this plane! We have work to do!"

I've got another plane story. The Los Angeles Times Syndicate published this story a few years ago about a flight cancellation that resulted in a long line of travelers trying to get booked on another flight. One man in line grew increasingly impatient and self-important, and he pushed his way to the front, and he angrily demanded a first class ticket on the next available flight. The ticket agent said, "I'm sorry, but I'll have to take care of the people who were ahead of you first." The irate man pounded his fist on the ticket counter, and he said, "Do you have any idea who I am? Do you have any idea who I am?" The ticket agent, unperturbed, picked up her microphone, and said, "Attention please. There's a gentleman at the ticket counter who does not know who he is. If there is anyone in the airport who can help identify him, please come to the counter." Now, hearing this, the man retreated, and went to the back of the line, and everybody in the line, the newspaper story says, started applauding.

In today's Gospel, Peter finally knows who Jesus is. Peter confesses that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, the Savior of the world, the Son of God, the one God has given us to save us from meaningless lives and hopeless deaths. That confession and that profession, that proclamation was not from logic, not from history nor human understanding, but it came up from Peter's soul, inspired by God's Holy Spirit. That was something that God revealed to Peter, and enabled him to believe, and be bold enough to say it out loud, without fear of making a fool of himself. He said, Jesus, you are the Christ, the Messiah. That means Savior, the son of the living God. Jesus confirmed it, Jesus agreed and blessed Peter and acknowledged that only God could give someone the faith to know and to say out loud such an awesome thing. I must say, as I read this text, the foundation upon which the kingdom of God is built, is not Peter himself. That's an odd thought. No, the foundation of the church is quite clearly the thing that made Peter blessed to begin with. It was his confession, his God-inspired profession of who Jesus is, his ability to know in his heart and to say out loud and live the truth that Jesus is the Savior, the Son of the living God.

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A famous French artist, whose name I will mispronounce, Georges Rouault, used his wonderful gift as a Christian with painting and with colors to paint some very beautiful portraits of Jesus. He painted many, many portraits. Toward the end of his career, he's quoted as saying, "My only ambition is to paint a Christ so moving that everyone who sees him will be converted, that everyone who sees him will become a follower." Now, if that is our ambition, to confess our faith, our God-given ability to believe, and without fear, proclaim as Peter did that Jesus Christ is the Savior, the Son of the Living God, if that is our desire, then we can use many ways to share and to show and to help others find this Savior that God has provided. We can use many ways to help others to find the Christ and the forgiveness of sins and the meaning in life and the hope beyond death. We can use canvas as Georges Rouault did. We can use our voices in song. We can use our money. We can use the radio. We can use the Internet, as we are now doing. We can use Bible studies and mission outreach. Now, here's the unexpected conclusion. We can use church buildings as well and programs. We can use all these things, and accomplish absolutely nothing, IF, we use them apart from the spirit of love. We can busy ourselves to death, and accomplish nothing if we do it apart from the spirit of love.

I cringe when I read of John Calvin's Geneva. Some of you know this story, and others may want to look it up later on. John Calvin's Geneva, it was an early Protestant city supposedly run on Christian principles, but absolutely intolerant and punitive and even death-dealing to those who varied the slightest on their understanding of who Jesus is. Some of you know the story of Miguel Servetus. He was a Christian. He was a Protestant. He went to a Christian/Protestant town, Geneva, taking with him a slightly different understanding of the Trinity. It's true that Calvin did warn him not to come, but how could he know that a fellow Christian, a fellow Christian, where there should be unity, who claimed the name of Jesus the Christ, would sentence him to death by burning at the stake because of a slight difference in theology, a slight disagreement that could be worked out. We can do quite a lot and accomplish nothing if we do not do it in the love of God. Love is supposed to illustrate, to embody the Christian life, not just proper words and theological formulas. I remember a heated argument once in South Africa with a hard core Calvinist, who made fun of my free will Wesleyan tendencies, and in the midst of the argument, there was a borderline agnostic, who leaned over and said, "I am sure Jesus would be proud of you both. Now, take your neutral corners and come out swinging." I just thought, Lord, forgive me. If we know Jesus as Christ, as Savior, then we know that Jesus was filled with a kind of love that can overcome our sins, our actions, and not only our failures to act, but the sins in our hearts.

We all have sin to a degree that only God knows, and I think that is a very good thing because only God could tolerate knowing just what goes on in our hearts. I believe that if each of us had unlimited power to make our thoughts real, I suspect that, first, we would wish for things, and then very quickly we would become bored with things, and wish secondly for the elimination of our enemies. I do believe that because such is the human heart, such is the human heart. I wish it were only my imagination, but history, even recent history, I believe that if we could wish our will into existence, the world would last maybe five minutes before no one was left. Such is illustrated by the tribal genocide in

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the past decade of 800,000 in Rwanda, the murder of over 200,000 in Bosnia, Herzegovina. See even in today's world when power shifts, some entire groups of people risk losing their lives. It barely makes the news! We do not properly account for the depth and the amazing amount of love it must take God to forgive the sinful imaginations of our hearts. Taking human action and inaction and inward hate and bitterness into account, the love and the amazing grace of God to come to us in Jesus Christ, it astounds me! It is truly amazing! Imagine, the love of God to come to us in Jesus knowing how we would treat him! Imagine the love God must have to send his Son in flesh knowing what we self-centered people would do to him. When we see love, when we see compassion, when we see the depths of divinity in the eyes of Jesus, we have to choose. We can repent and pray for mercy, and we will have it or we can seek in our most human way to kill and remove the offense of holiness, the offense of holiness from our midst. Which did we do in Jesus case? And I do mean we, not the Romans, and not the Jewish leaders, we, our sin, our choice, we as a fallen world beheld his holiness and we could not tolerate it. We shouted, “Kill him!” Remove the holiness, remove the love, and remove the light, which reveals the darkness we dwell in. I do not mean to depress in preaching this way. I mean instead to lift high who Jesus is. Such is humanity, such is humanity, and yet, and yet, God in Christ has the capacity to love and to forgive us, even knowing our hearts, even knowing we would nail our very own Savior to a cross. That's part of the story that we would not hear. It screams our rejection of holiness. It screams how far we have fallen. It screams who Jesus is that much more. He is able to love us knowing who and what we are, to love us even as the nails went, that is who Jesus is. He knows us and he loves us anyway. He loves us, and he can and will change us by the power of God's Holy Spirit. Who is Jesus? He is love in the face of sin. He is love in spite of sin. He is not a nice man for nice people. Jesus is hope for people of dust and darkness, offering by pure grace a pure gift, eternal life and the power to change and the forgiveness to begin again. That is why the Gospel is such good news. The Gospels paint one unified portrait of Jesus' identity. There are different ways of looking at Jesus and the different Gospels, but there is one unified identity, and that is Jesus as Savior. He is God, the same God who is love, made flesh and dwelt among us. Now, just as Peter did, when we acknowledge Jesus as Messiah, then we too have the keys to the kingdom. Christ is the key, a costly key, to a door, which would be impossibly locked unless God himself provided such a key, and God did. People everywhere need nothing less than a Savior, nothing less than the power of God to change, nothing less than divine grace and forgiveness to start over. That sort of healing hope, only God can give, and God has, and he has given it to us. We are the church, we are the repository, we are the example, and we are a light unto the world. Unto those suffering and struggling, we should example the love of Christ. That's our part. Not passive belief. You can be an instrument, and should be, of the healing power of God, a channel through which healing is given. We all know the existence of some people, who come into our lives and seem to take from us. We feel diminished and depleted and broken in their presence. They suck the air out of the room. But there are other people, who come into our lives, who are a healing presence, people who are a comfort when they don't even say a word, and we feel restored and renewed and replenished simply by their being with us. When we know the great love of God in Christ, and God's spirit dwells in us, we become that kind of person,

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a person of light and comfort and hope, and a person that heals. How can we hate when we know God knows our darkest self and loves us? How can we consider Jesus on the cross and refuse compassion and forgiveness to those who only slightly slight us? How can we fail to love when the power of God is within us, the same God who is love? Jesus' men and women are called to be little Christs in the world, echoes of his life. His love is compassion and his capacity to forgive. If we are not this now, we must ponder, we must prayerfully ponder some more on just who Jesus is. One of the reasons I hope we have come here today is to receive the grace to be healed and to be filled and to be a healing instrument to others. There's really nothing to compare with it. It does feel good in those moments when the healing power of God is within you and you become an agent, a channel, for God's love, and you know that it is touching, it is helping, hurting people, people who are searching for the keys of the kingdom, people who are searching and know they need a Savior. When you become that agent of God, you feel it, you feel it. Faith and the knowledge of who Jesus is is the key that unlocks the door to the kingdom. Peter stepped way out in faith to make his public profession that Jesus was more than a teacher. He was more. He was a Savior, and more than that, he was the Son of God. Jesus blessed that risky profession, and the church is built upon that risky profession. May the people of Main Street United Methodist Church and others within the sound of my voice risk for the sake of God's love and light. We need a Savior. We feel it inside. We know it in our hearts. Some have not heard. Some have not seen a life that is lived in public for Christ. It could be that by risking more for your faith and for Christ that the portrait of your life will move others to make a commitment to Christ. The time is now for public faith. Your risky faith proclaiming Jesus is Christ, the Son of God could be the proclamation that leads some lonely, hurting, hopeless, bitter soul into God's arms. What an honor! What an honor! We have gathered together in this church as witnesses to the Gospel truth that the Messiah embodied God's love in the world. We have gathered together in this sanctuary as witnesses to the Messiah as one who made it possible for us to experience the peace and the joy of life lived in unity with God's spirit. In this gathering, in this church, here and now, we acknowledge the presence of Christ in our midst. We receive him into our variously wounded and world-worn hearts. He is the good shepherd and we the sheep. He is the bread of life, and we are hungry. He is the light of the world, and we know that we have wandered in darkness. He is the way and the truth and the light and the path and the door to God. Not even the powers of death, the Scripture says, can prevail against his Church. We have got something worth sharing. It is he whom God sent into the world, not to condemn the world as it says in the Gospel of John, not to condemn it, but so that through him the world might be saved. This is whom we work for, and this is why he came. Let us share the Gospel in risky ways, and show that we know who Jesus is. Amen.