

This week I began to see on social media the posts about kids and their first day of the new school year. It made me think of my teaching days. When I was a teacher I would often begin a class by asking a question that seemed to have a very obvious answer. It seems like Jesus is using this same technique to begin today's interaction with the disciples. My students would figure out every year, usually before Thanksgiving, that the obvious answer was never the right answer. And that was the point of asking the question, to get the misconceptions out of the way at the beginning. In terms of religion, there's a great deal of popular thought that just isn't accurate. Judging from today's Gospel passage, the need to separate truth from popular conjecture has been a real need for a very long time.

Another Unfortunate thing, I've often heard this passage used to baptize the wrong notion that it is perfectly fine to think whatever you like about Jesus. The focus lands on a question that Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am?" rather than the correct answer that Jesus celebrates as blessed and coming straight from God the Father; namely, that Jesus is the Christ and Son of that same God. What gets glossed over all too often is that from this Gospel passage we learn that there are many wrong answers to the question, and one correct one that Jesus himself prefers. And it is also one of the foundational beliefs of Christianity, one of our defining truths.

I don't mean to say that there isn't room for personal relationship with Jesus, certainly there is and I have railed about the need for it from this very pulpit. However, that personal relationship has to have some rock-solid foundational truth that underpins it otherwise we are just having a relationship with our own wishful thinking. That Jesus is God of the Universe and savior of a flawed humanity has to be part of that foundational truth to our relationship with Jesus even if it is unpleasant to think about.

And why am I upsetting your day by getting in your face like this? Simply this, it is because Jesus is God of the Universe and Savior of flawed humanity that he can do us any good at all. This Gospel passage goes on to talk about the real need we have for Jesus as Christ and Son of God. The older translations of this passage read "the gates of Hell shall not prevail against" the church that Jesus will establish. If we look at the hatred, viciousness and violence aimed at people who publicly take a stand for their faith, "evil" as in "from Hell itself" is the only fitting description that comes to mind. Today's Gospel also talks about binding and loosing, and that's not bundles of sticks. It's sins that cling to our souls. The Lord generously allows that our sins be loosed or released or casted off in this life as long as we are not so arrogant and stiff necked as to say "I'm not doing that confession stuff." Are we so proud that we say we've never sinned? Are we so wise that we don't need anyone to help us see and overcome the subtle ways of sin in our lives? I find no shame in admitting that I need it. I am a sinner like anyone else. The only difference is that the Lord has chosen me to study the ways of sin so that I might help others in His name.

Hell, sin and destruction are our destiny without Jesus. As ugly and dismal as that sounds, that's the reality. This is the condition that God sent his only begotten Son into the

world to save the world from. Belief in Jesus doesn't mean we think he was a great teacher or a really swell guy, rather that He was and remains the Son of God. And that because of this belief, we work to change our lives to reflect Him and his teachings. A very important aside, Christians' lack of credibility with non-Christians because our work to reflect Christ and his teaching in our lives is often so pitifully scant. We may be able to give a dozen reasons why that is so, basically letting ourselves off the hook. Perhaps we should confession more and let ourselves off the hook less.

Moving back to the Gospel, Simon Peter confesses faith in Jesus as something entirely new. He wasn't just another preacher or prophet. Jesus came in power with a spirit like none other. This was God come to earth, offering a way back to the Father and to heaven if only the people would take it. And this remains true for us today. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God who holds out to us the way to salvation, if only we will take it. That way of salvation isn't totally free and easy. It has some conditions attached. However, it is doable. It can be filled with an unspeakable joy if we give ourselves to it. And in this way is life, everlasting life with God the Father in heaven. That is the promise of today's Gospel. Not a perfect political system. Not a utopian world. Freedom from our sins and eternal life in heaven.