

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

The passage for today's gospel reading is seen by many biblical scholars as a pivotal moment in Matthew's gospel. Jesus and the disciples have been travelling together for some time. After this passage, Jesus begins his journey toward the cross, and the tone and message of his teaching and his interactions with others become more serious and even dangerous.

But before they can move forward, Jesus has a heart to heart conversation with his friends. Maybe you've had these kinds of conversations with your parents, or your kids, or your closest friends. When your life is about to turn a corner, you make the time to talk about what's important.

I imagine there were a few of these talks this summer between parents and their kids who are heading off to college. I remember having a serious conversation with our daughter before she got married. And maybe you have given some advice to a friend before they retired. In all these situations, it's good to talk about expectations for what is coming next, and to get a reality check from those who have some experience in life.

It's important to have these conversations at pivotal moments in our lives of faith, too. Although, the conversations I just named can, and should, include talk about where God is at work in the midst of our changes and transitions. Sometimes we can recognize God's presence at the time, and sometimes it takes looking back to realize where God was guiding us to the people and resources we needed.

Jesus begins his talk with the disciples with a question. "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" It's almost as if Jesus is asking about someone else. The title "Son of Man" comes from the book of Daniel in the Old Testament and is connected to the word "Messiah." It refers to the One God will anoint to bring about the fullness of God's kingdom at the end of time.

Jesus uses this title for himself in Matthew's gospel, but in this question, Jesus seems to be asking the disciples about what people are expecting from God's chosen one, whether they recognize Jesus as that person or not. Human beings are gifted with wonderful imaginations, but much of what we anticipate in life is based on what we already know. The disciples tell Jesus that people are expecting the Son of Man to be like one of the great figures of recent or ancient history, like John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other prophets.

Jesus certainly had some things in common with these iconic figures. But then he gets to his real point by asking, "But who do you say that I am?" This turn makes clear what he implied with his first question. Jesus IS the Son of Man, God's Anointed One who will bring about the kingdom of heaven. And maybe it is in that very moment that all the lights turn on for Peter when he declares, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Peter and the others are going to need to remember this creed, this statement of faith in Jesus, as they journey with him to the cross. As we'll see next week, this remembering is not easy. Peter will be the first to slip up and not really understand what his declaration means, especially for himself and the others who follow Jesus.

I read this passage this week at the beginning of a meeting with our Faith Formation committee. We have met twice and still have more work to do to prepare for this fall. There are the logistics of limited seating for worship that we know will continue to keep our attendance low as we move into the fall. There are questions about whether children, youth, and adults will be willing to gather for Sunday School and Bible study groups until we feel like we have moved beyond this pandemic.

But beyond these practical matters, we are talking about this time, when we gather in smaller groups and less often, as an opportunity for our congregation to focus on faith formation that really means something. We want to help one another encounter Jesus, beyond the walls of this building.

In the past it has been easy to think that if we show up—for worship or Sunday School or Confirmation—that we have done our God-thing for the week and we can carry on with our lives. But when the going gets tough, it gets tough sometime between Monday and Saturday.

When we have these pivotal moments and transitions in our lives, we need to have practiced our faith in ways that we can seek God's guidance, acknowledge God's presence, and trust in our faith in God to carry us through.

Think about how your faith has been formed over the years. At our Faith Formation meeting we talked about how our parents or family lived their faith by serving others, and taught us that this was part of our vocation as Christians.

The church provides a nurturing setting to help us grow in faith. We talked about the hymns and songs that help us proclaim the truths of God's greatness. One of our young moms has cut up bulletins and taped some of her favorite hymns above her baby's changing table so she can sing these songs to her little one and begin building this foundation of faith in his life.

We also talked about the resources we offer, like the *Christ in our Home* devotional books, or the *Taking Faith Home* inserts that are now sent out in our weekly emails. Our committee members said they like these resources, but they need some help on how to use them in the midst of their busy family life. So stay tuned for more news on how we plan to help with that!

The message from this gospel text today is that Peter came to KNOW Jesus as "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" not because of what other people had told him he should believe. But he came to this statement of faith because of his time spent with Jesus and other believers, and by God's own revelation in his heart.

This is the hope we have for all those who engage with the ministry here at Zion Lutheran Church. We want to provide opportunities to encounter Jesus Christ—in Christian community, in the Word of God found in the Holy Scriptures and our prayers and songs, and in the ways we practice our faith in love and service toward our neighbors.

At this time when our access to larger gatherings is so limited, we can turn our attention to the formation of our faith in new ways, or ways we intend to do but don't always make time for.

In Holy Baptism we pray for the newly baptized that they would be sustained by the gift of the Holy Spirit, which includes the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of knowledge and the fear—or awe and deep reverence—for the Lord, and the spirit of joy in the presence of God.

These are beautiful descriptions of what it means to be formed in faith. As we become more comfortable with the practices of prayer, and seeking wisdom from God's word, and bringing our praise and thanksgivings to God, we more naturally will be able to share the truth of God's love and care with others.

Now, at the end of our gospel passage, Jesus "sternly ordered" the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. Maybe it just wasn't time for that big news to get out yet. Maybe he had more ministry to do before giving the authorities reason to arrest him.

Or maybe...maybe Jesus wanted others to have the same opportunity to encounter him in their own ways and in their own time. The Holy Spirit works faith in each of us in ways that are meaningful so that we learn to recognize God's good and unique purposes for us.

It is not OUR job to form faith in one another. That's the work of the Holy Spirit. Our role as the church is to live out the good news—the gospel of Jesus Christ through acts of mercy and forgiveness and providing opportunities to meet Jesus in this gathering of believers and in our everyday lives.

May Christ be made known to you today, and may our faith in him grow into a deeper love for God and our neighbor.

Thanks be to God. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Confident of God's care and helped by the Holy Spirit, we pray for the church, the world, and all who are in need.

A brief silence.

Lord our rock, you are our foundation in Jesus Christ, your Son, whom we confess as the living God. Prepare your church for its mission in bearing witness to Christ, both here at home and throughout the world. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

You call forth praises from the far reaches of the universe to the smallest of creatures. Yet, this week creation is crying out in pain from wildfires, tornadoes and tropical storms. Bring rains and calm winds and restore the beauty and sustenance for all creatures. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord. Direct the leaders of countries, legislators and magistrates, mayors and councils, to walk in your ways. Help leaders respond to those in need with mercy and fulfill your loving purposes in the governance of peoples. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Though we walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve us, deliver us, and fulfill your purpose for us. According to your steadfast love, grant healing and wholeness to those who are bereaved, in trouble or adversity, or sick and in need of care, especially those named in our bulletin today. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

You call us into community as Zion Lutheran Church, in which we, though many, are one in Christ. May we recognize in ourselves and in one another the unique gifts you have given us for the building up of the church for the sake of the world. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

You are the everlasting Rock from which we were hewn, and you restore your people to joy and gladness. In blessed memory and hope, we thank you for the lives of our beloved dead especially Frank Valach who we laid to rest yesterday. Bring us with them to our heavenly home. Lord, in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

In the certain hope that nothing can separate us from your love, we offer these prayers to you, O God; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.