

**The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 19, Year B  
Holy Comforter Church  
The Rev. John E. Shields  
September 13, 2009**

**In the gospel this morning, Jesus wants to know what people are saying about him. He asks, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”**

**The disciples have ready answers, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”**

**But then Jesus says to them, “Who do you say that I am?” The question is being asked in the district of Caesarea Philippi, which is a Greek city, or as Jesus and his followers would have thought - a pagan city. Barclay, in his commentary, says that there were very few cities with more religious beliefs and associations than Caesarea Philippi.**

**The name of the city is taken from the name Caesar – the emperor - and Philip, Herod’s son – it was he, Philip, who named it.**

**I find that interesting -- in and of itself – in this very pluralistic environment, Jesus asks, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”**

**With all the competing religions and beliefs, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”**

**Well, he gets his answer from the disciples: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. All of those are**

**complementary answers. But then Jesus says to them, “Who do you say that I am?”**

**It is Peter, always the impetuous one who rushes to answer. Peter, according to Mark, says, “You are the Messiah.” (In Matthew he adds, “... the Son of the living God.”**

**There is an account of this in all three Synoptic Gospels, in Mark, Peter says, “You are the Messiah.” Luke has it, “You are the Messiah of God.” Matthew as mentioned says, “You are the Messiah, Son of the Living God.” What is very clear - is that this is a very important happening in the life of Christianity – it is a foundational event.**

**Of course much has been made of Jesus’ response to Peter. In Matthew the writer has Jesus saying, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” Which is to say that, Peter was inspired by God to have this insight into the nature of Jesus.**

**Of course, Jesus doesn’t stop there he goes on to say, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.”**

**Now, of course, much has been made of this passage including the Roman church’s claim that this establishes the authority of the papacy – Peter being the first bishop of Rome and all his successors have been given this same authority – the authority is implied through Jesus saying that he will “...give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”**

**In Matthew, Jesus gives the name Peter to Simon – Peter is Petros in Greek and that is very close to the Greek word for rock - Petra.**

**So this is the rock upon which the church is to be founded.**

**Well, let's take a look at the rock – the new rock star – Peter.**

**You may recall the account of the disciples out in a boat in very rough seas and Jesus walked to them on the water. They were terrified until Jesus identified himself and told them to not be afraid. Peter saw this and wanted to come to Jesus – which Jesus encouraged him to do. Peter gets out of the boat and begins walking toward Jesus. He becomes aware of the wind and waves and starts to sink, at which time he cries out, “Lord, save me.”**

**This is a case of the man, soon to be named “rock” sinking like a \_\_\_\_\_.**

**But this isn't the end of Peter's actions getting him into trouble.**

**As you see in this gospel, Peter is rebuked by Jesus because he cannot stand to find out what kind of Messiah Jesus is going to be -- and Jesus says to him “Get behind me, Satan!”**

**Of course in the next chapter of Mark we will find Jesus with Peter, James and John on the Mount of the Transfiguration and Peter will be trying to construct a monument in the midst of a profound religious experience.**

**But of course this is not Peter, the rock's worst moment. That is yet to come.**

**It will come when the chips are down – when Jesus is being tried by the authorities – Peter, the rock, becomes gravel or dust out of his fear of being identified as one of Jesus’ friends. When things are at their worst for Jesus – his friend, Peter says, “I do not know the man!”**

**The rock abandons his friend, just when the friend needs him the most.**

**“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...”  
Why did Jesus do that? Why did he pick such a loser to start the church? Why did he pick Peter? Peter is a fallible, sometimes doubting, and sometimes cowardly, sometimes bumbling person.**

**Perhaps that is why he picked him.**

**Perhaps Peter is like you or me --- and perhaps, just perhaps Jesus is asking you and me. Who do you say that I am? Jesus asks that question in today’s gospel – Jesus asks that question today.**

**Who do you say that I am?**

**Who do we say that Jesus is?**

**I would bet that we might be surprised at the answers -- if we could stop and talk about that right now. You know if we could do one of those exercises where we turned and talked to the people in the pew behind us – relax, I am not going to do it.**

**“Who do you say that I am?”**

**I wonder what we would hear if we did the exercise.**

**We might hear something like:**

**“Well, I think Jesus was a great prophet and teacher – I’m not too sure about the Son of God business.”**

**Or**

**“Jesus is the way, the truth and the light –no one can come to the Father, except through him.”**

**Or**

**“Jesus --- well --- he is like Superman and Spiderman --- he can do cool things and read minds and work miracles and stuff.”**

**Or**

**“Jesus, Jesus is a social revolutionary – he is always trying to change the status quo to set people free from oppression.”**

**Or**

**“ I don’t know who he is – but he is the reason I have to come to church at least twice a year.”**

**“Who do you say that I am?”**

**Let us all be reminded of what we have said many times:**

**Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your savior? I do!**

**Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love? I do!**

**Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord? I do!**

**It is in the baptism service, we’ve all said it so many times.**

**Who have you said that I am?: Savior, Lord who loves me and imparts grace into my life.**

**Who do you say that I am?**

**Jesus. You are the one that is there when I need to be pushed beyond where I have been before – you are the one supporting me and enabling me to risk, to help, even when I don't want to – you are the one who uses me to heal hurt – you are the one who uses me to bring peace – You are the one who is there when I need to welcome the stranger and alien, even when others are critical and unsupportive – You are the one who encourages and allows me to live sacrificially for others.**

**I am sure that Jesus picked Peter exactly because of Peter's inadequacies and weaknesses. I am sure that Peter was picked because he was so fallible, so impetuous, so earnest and bumbling – so absolutely imperfect.**

**The message is simple enough, if Jesus can use Peter to build his church, he can sure use you and me.**

**We have all said those vows many times and we have even meant them on occasion and many other times we have been on automatic pilot and just said them without thinking – but we said them.**

**Being a Christian is not a one-time deal – good people — it is a process of living into a relationship with God that changes and ebbs and flows. It is a relationship that is best nurtured in the company of fellow travelers on the same journey.**

**The one you seek to know is one who journeys with you – through your doubts, denials, confusion and even rejection – he never leaves you – you have been marked as his own forever – he is your brother, your friend, your Lord and your savior.**

**Amen**