

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Children of God: Name Calling”
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Genesis 24:34-52; Matthew 16:13-20

The church has a marketing crisis.

Not our church in particular. In fact, as Protestant churches go, we’re doing pretty well in the marketing department.

But the Christian church as a whole, particularly in Western society, has a major marketing problem. According to a number of surveys conducted in the last decade, people in the 40 and younger crowd overwhelmingly testify that the church is homophobic, judgmental, hypocritical, overly political, irrelevant, insensitive, boring, chauvinistic, arrogant, anti-intellectual, and confusing.

Now, this may not sound like the church you know. Hopefully it doesn’t match up with your experience here. But if you ask the average non-churchgoing person what they think about Christianity, you’re likely to hear several of these adjectives used.

If the church were a name-brand product, we’d be in serious trouble. The executives would be firing the entire marketing department, and the board would be calling for the executives’ resignations.

But we’re the church. What do we care what people think about us? We know we’re awesome. We’ve got Jesus on our side. We know who we are, what we’re about. In fact, we’re Everybody’s Church. That’s awesome, right?

Right. What’s not awesome is that we’re in the same sinking ship as the rest of Western Christianity. Our church is called the same names as all the others. I’ve talked with many youth and adults in this church who are frustrated by experiences of being misunderstood, mislabeled, and misinterpreted because of their Christian identity. Many of us don’t even bother identifying ourselves as Christians in mixed social situations anymore because we don’t want to deal with the hassle of defending the church against name-calling and misrepresentation.

Meanwhile, the Presbyterian Church (USA) loses thousands of members a year. Protestant Christianity hemorrhages membership in the U.S. and Europe. Western Christianity as a whole is in massive decline.

We’ve got a major marketing crisis on our hands, and no one seems quite able to figure out what to do about it.

In our story from Matthew today, Jesus seems to have encountered a marketing crisis of his own. He asks his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” It would be similar to the CEO of Coca-Cola asking the market research department, “what are people saying about the Cokes with the names on them?” Jesus is doing market research with his disciples.

And just like executive yes-men, the disciples are quick to devise flattering responses. John the Baptist returned from the dead. Elijah, Jeremiah, or whatever prophet Jesus might fancy himself as embodying.

The truth is, most people are saying that Jesus is a dangerous zealot or a delusional wanna-be.

Sure, maybe some people who have heard Jesus preach or experienced his healing power are proposing more positive possibilities for his identity. But that is more akin to people trying to peek under Batman’s mask or match Superman to the

bespectacled Clark Kent. The miraculous teacher and healer might have a secret identity as a resurrected past prophet and hero of Israel.

What people are really saying about Jesus, for the most part, is highly unflattering.

Jesus, however, sees right through the disciples' flattery. And so he puts the question to them directly. The disciples have travelled with Jesus for three years. They have witnessed his miracles, heard his teaching, and experienced the challenge and rejection that has overshadowed his entire ministry. They know him better than anyone else. They see behind the mask, they receive special instruction and interpretation. And so, Jesus asks them, "who do you say that I am?"

And wouldn't you know it, Simon Peter hits the nail on the head with the first try. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Way to go, Peter. For all of his mistakes and misunderstandings, his denials and difficulties, we see here that Peter at least gets something right along the way. Like a cracker-jack marketing director, he is right on message.

Peter is rewarded for his prompt and sincere response. Jesus calls him blessed.

But Jesus also reveals something about the nature of Peter's response. It isn't the product of hard work, study, devotion, or market research. Jesus asserts that "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." Peter's answer is not based on Jesus' reputation but on God's revelation.

Even so, Jesus is willing to build his church on this "rock." Peter is rewarded for something he allegedly didn't even do.

Following this victory, Peter then goes on to object to Jesus' plans and misunderstand what kind of Messiah Jesus will be and to deny Jesus after his arrest. But because he gets one right answer, the church is really going to be built upon a guy who, a few verses later, Jesus refers to as "Satan"? Seems like a bad move, Jesus.

That is, unless we take a closer look at the meaning of revelation.

I don't know about you, but my picture of revelation has always been this beam of light that suddenly shines down on me as I'm puzzling over the mysteries of the universe with the clarity of insight that I'm seeking at the moment.

Revelation comes in a number of shapes and sizes throughout the Bible, ranging from encounters with divine messengers to the very presence of God. The prophets receive messages from God, and the apostles see visions while waking and sleeping.

But in today's story, we don't hear about God's activity until after it happens. Peter doesn't even realize that his insight is divinely inspired until Jesus points it out. The nature of this revelation is entirely different from Elijah's encounter with God in a desolate silence or Jeremiah's call to be a prophet. It looks nothing like Peter's later vision of unclean animals leading to the inclusion of Gentiles in the church or Paul's encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

This revelation is an insight that is only discerned to be the work of God in retrospect. It is a revelation that results from Peter's experience of Jesus. He has experienced Jesus to be one who is uniquely anointed, one gifted with divine power and blessed in a way only the Son of the living God could be. And this is the revelation, the testimony, the rock upon which the church is built.

Lest we think this is a new kind of revelation inaugurated by Jesus, we have our story from Genesis this morning to remind us that human experience of everyday encounters and relationships has always been a form of revelation for God's people. Abraham's servant is charged with finding a wife for Isaac from Abraham's tribal people, the Arameans. Abraham expresses trust that God will provide a wife for his son. The servant prays for a sign as to which woman is the right one. And the servant worships and thanks God when he meets Rebekah and when Rebekah is free to go with him.

Notice that there are no visions, no heavenly agents, no divine words. Just the very human experience of tribal and family relationships, the struggle to find a suitable life partner, the business-like transaction of a marriage contract in the ancient world. And yet, God is acknowledged as the orchestrator of these events and the source of all positive outcomes. This story, like many others in the Bible, is, as Walter Bruggeman says, a testimony to “a world-view in which there are no parts of life experience which lie beyond the purpose of God.” All of life is interpreted in relationship to the character of God.

This is Peter’s revelation, Peter’s testimony. His experience of life in relationship to Jesus leads him to the conclusion that he is no one other than the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. This is not whispered in his ear by the Holy Spirit or given to him in a flashy vision, at least not from what we’re told in the text. But rather, God has led Peter to this revelation through long walks on dusty roads, meals shared with sinners and outcasts, healing touches and harsh words, inspiring teaching and confounding questions. All of this somehow adds up for Peter to an experience of Jesus that reveals him as the Messiah.

And that revelation is the foundation of the church, a church so strong that even the “gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” Now, the reference to Hades here is not the notion of hell – a place of punishment or evil. This is the Old Testament concept of Sheol, the place of the dead. In other words, the power of the church will be even stronger than the power of the greatest enemy of humankind – death itself.

When I read that, I wonder if this is consistent with our view of the church today. What if, instead of judgmental or hypocritical, the church was known as that place more powerful than death? What if, instead of trying to be warm and friendly, we saw ourselves as powerfully life-giving?

When Jesus tells Peter that “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven,” he is connecting his church and his kingdom. The church is to be the epicenter of “God’s kingdom come,” as Jesus teaches his disciples to pray. Is that the church that is being described as chauvinistic, overly political, and homophobic?

When Jesus tells Peter that “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,” he is giving the church the authority to do as Peter has done, to interpret our lived experience as having sacred significance. And the church is where we remember that sacredness, where we discover that meaning. Is this the church that is being described as irrelevant, insensitive, and boring?

In the end, it would seem that Jesus is not concerned about his marketing crisis. Jesus tells his disciples to keep his identity a secret. People will continue to call him all kinds of names, including false prophet, blasphemer, and finally, sarcastically, King of the Jews.

Perhaps we could wish Jesus had had a better marketing department. If he had fired his disciples and hired some cracker-jack PR firm, maybe things would have gone another way for him.

But it is sometimes only in retrospect that we can see the activity and purpose of God in the events of our lives. If we accept “a world-view in which there are no parts of life experience which lie beyond the purpose of God,” we interpret Jesus’ life differently. We understand our own experiences differently. God’s revelation is all around us – in the work we do, the strangers we meet, the meals we share. The prayer imploring “God’s kingdom come” is being answered here and now in this time and place.

And so, I have a question for you all. A real question. We have heard the words that many people use to describe the church today. I want you to imagine that, just as Jesus turned to his disciples and asked, “who do you say that I am?” the church, the body of Christ, has turned to you and asked, “who do you say that I am?” Is the church judgmental, irrelevant, or confusing? What does your experience tell you? Are even the positive words we often have about the church really adequate to describe the locus of God’s power over death? What is sacred about our experience here, what experiences

have lasting meaning, eternal reverberations? There are sheets of plain white paper in each of the pews. I'm going to ask you to pass those along to your neighbors, maybe share some pens. And I invite you to take a minute to choose a name, a word - maybe not the only word, maybe not even your best word – but a word that describes your experience of church, your reason for being here this morning. When you are done, if you feel comfortable sharing, I invite you to hold up your sheet of paper so we can hear one another's responses.

Responses included: Hope, Love, Caring Community, Teacher, Peace, Working for Justice, Renewal, Support, Affirmation, Family.