

WGUMC November 24, 2013 Christ the King Sunday  
"and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord" Matthew 16:13-28

On Friday, we marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John F. Kennedy's assassination. All the books that have been written, all the movies that have been made, and we're still wondering who he was. JFK was president for just three years. He died young. We didn't have enough time to get to know what he was really all about.

Jesus' ministry lasted about three years. He died young. And 2000 years later, after all the books and movies, we are still wondering who he was. And so the story in Matthew's Gospel today is for us.

Jesus was going about Galilee and Judea, teaching and healing, and the people were beginning to question whether he might be the one. So Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they reported that some thought he was John the Baptist brought back to life after being killed by King Herod. Others thought he was Elijah, the

prophet who is supposed to come back before the Messiah comes. Or maybe he was one of the other dead prophets. The people weren't quite sure. Then Jesus asked his closest friends, "But who do *you* say that I am?"

And that really is the question, isn't it? Who is Jesus for us? The Apostles' Creed tries to help us answer that question, first by piling onto Jesus' name a bunch of divine titles: Christ, only Son, our Lord. Maybe if we understood something about this name and these titles, we would understand something about our savior.

The Gaither's sang the song, "There's Something about That Name," but there's really nothing special about the name "Jesus." In the Hebrew, it's actually "Joshua." That's what his parents called him, or as it would be pronounced "Yehoshuah." It was a very common name, like Tom, Dick, or Harry. There were lots of Jesus' around. Remember, Barabbas was also named Jesus.

This is important: that Jesus had a common name. It says that he was a regular guy, from an average family who lived in an ordinary town in Galilee. His name tells us that he was, in many ways, just like one of us. That's something that often gets lost in all of our songs about Jesus: his humanness.

But coupled with the name "Jesus" is the divine title of "Christ". By the way, it's a title, not a last name. "Christ" is the Greek form of the Hebrew word *Messiah*. It means "anointed one". It was a title used for the earthly kings of Israel and Judah. But the "anointed" left the people disappointed, so much so that they eventually began to think of the Messiah not as an earthly king, but a heavenly one. The Messiah would be God's special agent who would come at the end of time to clean up the corruption, lift up the downtrodden and restore God's kingdom of justice and peace. The early Christians called Jesus the "Christ" because they believed that he was the one and that the time had come.

Now put this name and title together and who do we have? A common man who was an agent of God. A man who lived the life we all have to live, but at the same time showed us a life we never dreamed we could live. And so he became our divine connection. In Jesus Christ we have the bridge between who we are and who, by the grace of God, we could be. In Jesus Christ we have the bridge between humanity and divinity. That's why we call him the way; he is our way to God.

But we're still not there. Jesus Christ is even more than a man and an agent of God. The Creed says that Christ is the only Son of God. Here's another title. Again, it comes from the Hebrew Bible. King David is sometimes referred to as God's son. But Christians took that title from him, because they wanted to say something special about Jesus and his relationship with God: that Jesus was in the Father and the Father in him. [John 14:11]

Now, the great news of the gospel is that Christ doesn't keep that relationship to himself, but opens it up to everyone who believes in him and is likewise in him. We, too, can be sons and daughters of God by way of adoption. Paul says, "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him." [Romans 8:15b-17]

*If* we suffer with him... That's a big "if" and it leads us to our last title in the Creed: Lord. That's a scary word, because it demands something of us. In the Hebrew Bible, the word meant one who commands respect and exercises authority. It was usually used in reference to royalty. "The Lord is king; let the earth rejoice!" [Ps 97:1]

But when the folk in the Gospels saw Jesus, I suspect that most of them didn't see a king. Yet they did see one who

commanded respect and exercised authority. Matthew says the people were amazed at him because he taught as one having authority. [7:28-9]

But *acknowledging* him as Lord is not the same as *following* him as Lord. Jesus knew this when he said, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." [7:21]

"Who do you say that I am?" If we say Jesus is Lord, the way is going to be hard. For when Jesus talks about doing the will of his father, he's usually talking about suffering. "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." In other words, suffer with him and you will be glorified with him. "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." [16:24-25]

John F. Kennedy was from a staunch Roman Catholic family. He would have been very familiar with this passage of Scripture. As a navy lieutenant in WWII, he was willing to lose his life, if not for Christ's sake, then for his country's. Coming home a hero, he wasn't one of those who thought the country owed him something. Instead, he reenlisted for a life of public service. Twenty years later, what a Japanese destroyer couldn't do, one of his own countrymen managed to do.

While JFK's love for his country is inspiring, Jesus gives us an even higher calling. If Jesus is our Lord, we'll have to deny our own selves, our wants and needs—our own country, if need be—and take up our cross and follow him. We have to be willing to lose absolutely everything and never once think that God owes us anything. For disciples never ask what God can do for us. We only want to know what we can do for God.

In the interest of bipartisanship, I'll remind you that JFK isn't the only president who made the ultimate sacrifice. There

was another anniversary this week. You might have missed it. Last Tuesday was the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. In perhaps the best speech given by our greatest president, we hear the call to dedicate ourselves to "the unfinished work," to the "great task remaining before us."

For Christians, this great task is believing in Jesus Christ, God's only son our Lord. And that means taking up our cross and following him, always willing to give him the "last full measure of our devotion" so that the kingdom of God will have a new birth in us and so that the Church which is of Jesus Christ and by Jesus Christ and for Jesus Christ, shall not perish from the earth.

My apologies for paraphrasing Kennedy's inaugural and Lincoln's Gettysburg addresses. Let us pray. Merciful God, we confess that when we go to vote for a president, we are always looking for a savior. But as Christians, we should know better. We already have one. So, we thank you for Jesus, the man,

who knows all the limitations of human life and perplexing problems of human society. And we thank you for Jesus the Christ, the one who won't abandon us to our problems, but has been anointed with the power to see us through them all. We thank you for Jesus Christ, your Son, who invites even lowlifes like us into your life and into your family. As your adopted sons and daughters, we are grateful that we can be confident enough in your love for us to take the risk of giving our lives for others. We thank you, for Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord in whose name we pray. Amen.