

Sermon – August 27, 2023

Pastor Dan Hollis

Matthew 16:13-20

When I was growing up, at all the middle school and high school dances there was one staple song that you knew you'd hear at some point during the night. Everybody knew *all* the moves to it, and as soon as it started playing—well, some people would groan, but most people would get out on the dance floor and join the routine. Maybe every generation had a song like that. Maybe you're thinking of yours right now. The Electric Slide, maybe? "The Hustle?" I don't know, "The Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy from Company B?" In *my* day, that song was "Cotton-Eyed Joe."

The lyrics to the chorus of Cotton-Eyed Joe are burned into the hearts of countless millennials across the country. Somebody says those words within a hundred feet of us, and we start to get war flashbacks, or get activated like sleeper agents. "Where did you come from, where did you go; where did you come from, Cotton-Eyed Joe?" Like, somebody just has to ask the innocuous question, "Where did you come from?" anywhere in earshot of me, and immediately all I hear in my head is violins and a southern twang finishing the lyric. That's a power you *have* over me now.

Now... over the course of preaching about Jesus' conversation with Simon Peter, from our reading today, I'm going to reference both the lyrics to "Cotton-Eyed Joe" *and* Senator Joseph McCarthy's infamous quote, "Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist party?" It'll make sense, I promise.

See, there's a question we all should start asking ourselves as Christians, as people faith, as human beings. It's a question Jesus Christ asked of himself, something he asked of his apostles constantly, something he asked and asks *still* of his church, and something the living God is asking *you* today. **"Who were you before, who are you now, and who will Christ cause you to become?"**

"Who were you before, who are you now, and who will Christ cause you to become?" Now to fully answer that, you first have to figure out who Christ *is* to you. *That's* something Jesus asked the Disciples in our *reading* set in Caesarea Philippi. "Who do you say that I am?"

Identity is important. Who we *were* and who we are *now* impact everything about the way we live our lives.

Our *story* and our understanding of ourselves in *context* makes *meaning* out of our "one wild and precious life."

Jesus put a lot of time into figuring out his own identity, and spent a good portion of his *ministry* trying to inspire his followers into thinking more deeply about who this man they were traveling with from town to town really was. And when he *did* that—which

wasn't all the time, he had a great *deal* to do and a great many more *questions* to inspire—but when he *did* explore his own identity and his *role* in the world, he would often use the phrase, "Son of Man."

Throughout the Hebrew Bible—and the use people of Jesus' time would have recognized—"son of man" was another way of saying "human." The phrase, "sons of men," was essentially, "humanity," in contrast with "divinity." *God* is all-powerful and immortal... *humans* are weaker and frail. Now, in the Book of *Daniel*, the *prophet* Daniel envisioned a future where the evil powers of this world would have their rule stripped from them, and then God's authority over the world would be given to "one like a son of man," who would establish a new everlasting kingdom.

"I saw one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven... to him was given dominion and glory and kingship". Remember the term, "son of man"... all of God's power and authority, *granted* to... some human.

So when Jesus used the phrase "son of man," his Jewish followers would have recognized the *general* meaning of "human." And a *few* might have even remembered that passage in Daniel, especially if they had a temple education. But in all those cases, the phrase was always "*a* son of man," or "*sons* of men." *Jesus* is really the first example we have written down of someone saying "*the* son of man." And he does it often. He calls himself "*the* son of man." That would be like today somebody calling themselves "*the* human." Like, "Who am I? I'm the human."

Him saying that was... puzzling to people, both because of how strange it sounded, *and* because of the ways he *used* it. 'Cause he didn't use it *all* the time. He wasn't like Elmo or Queen Victoria, he *did* often use the word "I" when referring to himself. But he would use the phrase, "the Son of man," really only when he was talking about three specific things:

[1] His *human* nature and his work here in the human world; [2] his painful death and resurrection; and [3] his future in glory as judge and redeemer.

His *use* of "the Son of man" started to become a trigger phrase; you'd hear that phrase and you couldn't *help* but think of a humble human working among the people, to whom would one day be *given* the power and authority of the Most High. "Where did you come from... where did you go?"

And by the time of our reading, word of the phrase, "the Son of Man," had gotten *around* enough to start raising some questions. Who *is* this son of man we keep hearing about? Is it a person, is it an idea? Is it a *prophet* who's come and gone, is it a *revolution* that's yet to come? And in the *end*, the question, 'Are you *the* human everybody's talking about?' will be the question the authorities ask *Jesus* before sentencing him to death.

“From now *on* you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.”

Now Jesus knew the answer to the question asked of Cotton-Eyed Joe. He knew where he came from: a human of humble origins, who grew up to heal, to teach, to feed and uplift, and would go on to suffer and die for the people he loved so much. And he knew where he’d go: resurrection and glory and a living faith to transform this world into a heavenly kingdom. But he still had to *pose* that question to his *Disciples*.

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And, “who do you say that I am?” He had to ask the question, because time was running short, and the Disciples were really good at proving that they didn’t always understand him. If he was ever going to have any lasting impact on them, they had to understand him for who was, who he is, and who he will be.

Now in this moment, Simon Peter found his voice and gave an answer from his heart: ‘You are the Messiah—the Anointed One—the Son of the living God.’ With those words, Peter *proved* that the *way* he understood the *role* of Jesus in his life... would have the kind of impact Jesus *wanted* to have.

And Peter didn’t *always* get it right.

Where did *Peter* come from? This is ‘he of little faith’ whose doubts caused him to sink in the waves two chapters ago. And where will he *go*? The night of the Last Supper, after Jesus is arrested, a woman will ask him, ‘Are you now, or have you ever been, a follower of Jesus of Galilee...’ and he will say, “I do not *know* the man!”

But for this moment, *in* this moment, Peter knew the answer to Christ’s question. He knew who Jesus was to him, and the role Jesus had in his life. And it is on *that* rock, that understanding of who “the Son of man” is to just *one* person... Christ can *really* build something.

Which brings us back to the question I asked you. **“Who were you before, who are you now, and who will Christ cause you to become?”** To answer that, you have to know *yourself*, and you have to know *Christ*. As Christ did, we have to know where we come from—in all our frail and humble humanity. And as Christ did, we have to see clearly ourselves and our actions in the *present*. And like *Peter*, we need to put some real hard thought into not only who Jesus *was*, but also to who Jesus *is* to *us*. Really think about what Jesus *means* to us, or really *should* mean to us.

What *role* do we want Jesus to have in our lives, what *active* role can the Son of the *living* God be *doing* in our lives? Because man, when Peter *couldn’t* answer that question, things really got tough for him. But when he *could*... now *that’s* when Jesus could get some real work done.

What could Jesus build in us—*from* us—if we each spent real time and effort figuring out *what* and *who* this “son of man” is to us, and *can* be *for* us. Not just as buzzwords or half-remembered song lyrics, or as a “faith” that lives in the back of our minds somewhere. But as something *alive*, something that was and is and ever shall be... something that’s still speaking and still at work... something that wants to build the kingdom of heaven out of *you*.

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” That *prayer* can be *more* than a plea, when we *engage* with the Son of the living God.

Who were you before, who are you now, and who will Christ cause you to become? Christ built some pretty amazing things out of a... *human* like Peter. I wonder what Christ could build out of you. In the days you have left on this Earth... wouldn’t you like to find out?

The poet Mary Oliver: “Tell me, what else should I have done? / Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon? / Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?”

Something tells me... “the Son of Man” could help you figure that out. Thanks be to God. Amen.