

8.23.26 Sermon on Matthew 16:13-28

You may have seen some headlines over the past week out of Dearborn, Michigan featuring a right-wing provocateur named Jake Lang, who served four years in prison for his part in the January 6 attack. Jake Lang is a Christian nationalist known for his Islamophobic demonstrations. This week, he gathered a group of demonstrators carrying Christian symbols in what he called “Christian Crusader March” through Dearborn, which is home to one of the largest Muslim communities in the United States. The city was concerned enough about potential conflict that they moved their city council meeting to a different location. Protestors and counter-protestors gathered outside. Lang claimed, without any evidence, that Dearborn was operating under Islamic, rather than American law, and he made a point of reminding everyone that Muslims were a small minority in a Christian nation. Just think about this for a minute. Christians marching into a community largely populated by people of another faith, drawing upon symbolism of a history rife with religious violence, talking about taking a city back, talking about who really belongs in America, presenting Christianity as something that must conquer. And I keep thinking, what kind of Messiah is this version of Christianity presenting?

Here we find the language of dominance, of conquest – this is the language of the Roman Empire. And this language brings us directly to Caesarea Philippi and the story we heard this morning, where Jesus turns to his disciples and asks them, point blank, “Who do you say that I am?”

There probably isn’t a question more important in all of his ministry than this one that Jesus asks of his followers. Before this, he asks, “Well, what are other people saying? Who are they saying the Son of Man is?” And the disciples tell him: “Some say John the Baptist, and others say Elijah, while others still say one of the prophets.” But now it gets personal. It’s not just “What are other people saying.” It’s, “Who do you say that I am?”

And here, Peter has one of his finest moments as he makes the confession, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” This is a huge claim. What does it mean to name Jesus as the Messiah?

The Hebrew word, *meshiach*, means “anointed one.” The Greek word, *Christos*, means essentially the same thing. Kings were anointed, priests were anointed. To be anointed meant to be set apart by God for a particular calling. And by the time Jesus came along, after generations of conquest, occupation, and foreign domination, the idea of a coming Messiah for the people of Israel had become intertwined with the idea of political deliverance.

They were living under the Roman Empire, where Caesar’s armies occupied their land. They paid exorbitant taxes. Their lives and livelihoods were largely dictated by their occupying forces. They lived under threat of violence.

When Peter confesses Jesus as Messiah, he is making a declaration that he is giving his ultimate allegiance to him. Caesar does not rule, Jesus does. But even as Peter gets this part right, he also almost immediately gets it wrong. This morning, the lectionary only contained verses 13-20 and saved the rest of chapter 16 for next week, but I decided to call an audible and add next week’s reading onto this week because we really can’t read them separately. We need to read what happens next:

From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

Then Jesus told his disciples, “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

“For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

Peter is utterly horrified by what Jesus is saying. He rebukes Jesus, telling him he doesn’t have a clue about what it means to be the Messiah. “Jesus, Messiahs don’t lose! They don’t suffer, or get arrested or get crucified! Messiahs are winners!” Peter has the right title for Jesus, but the wrong definition.

Here I think we see an unfortunate truth that has been played out throughout history: it is possible to confess Jesus with our lips while somehow imagining a Jesus who looks a lot more like Caesar. We can use all the right words and still fundamentally misunderstand the way of Christ, just like Peter does.

And when Jesus rebukes Peter for misunderstanding, he doesn’t mince words. He says, “Get behind me, Satan.” It’s not that Peter has stopped loving Jesus or believing in Jesus, it’s that he wants Jesus to exercise power in the way that the world exercises power. And that’s not the kind of Messiah that Jesus is.

But Jesus recognizes that temptation. He faced it himself, if you recall. Back in the beginning of Matthew’s gospel, Satan takes Jesus up a high mountain and shows him all of the kingdoms of the world in all of their glory and tells him, “I will give these all to you, if you will just fall down and worship me.” Jesus himself is offered political power over all the nations of the earth, and he refuses. And now Peter is echoing Satan’s temptation. It’s as if he is saying, “Jesus, you can have the world! Just use the world’s ways! Take the power! Lead the revolution! Defeat your enemies! Conquer them! You can win, Jesus!” But Jesus knows that voice, and he commands, “Get behind me, Satan.”

I wonder what Jesus might say to parts of American Christianity today. I wonder what Jesus might say to each of us when our hearts start grasping after power. What might Jesus say when Christians become obsessed with dominance or control? I wonder what Jesus would say if he saw his cross wrapped up tightly in the American flag? I think he would say the same thing he said to Peter: “Get behind me, Satan!” Jesus continues on, giving Peter an explanation, saying, “You are not setting your mind on divine things, but human things.” What could be more human than an obsession with power and control?

Every empire has certainly understood the kind of power that Peter is looking for. But Jesus rebukes Peter because God’s power looks different. And so he begins to tell Peter what “Messiah” actually means. It doesn’t look like Caesar, and it doesn’t look like building an army. Instead, it looks like following Jesus in the way of non-violence, in the way of self-giving, to the cross. Jesus has been teaching and showing his

disciples throughout his ministry what the power of God looks like. Power doesn't look like dominating one's enemies, it looks like loving them. It looks like blessing the meek and the merciful. It looks like blessing the peacemakers and loving the ones who persecute you. Jesus shows his disciples that power doesn't come from excluding or marginalizing people, but from caring for the vulnerable – touching lepers, welcoming children, eating with sinners, spending time with outsiders.

Later in Matthew's gospel, Jesus will say that the true test of faithfulness for the nations will not be whether believers successfully established a Christian government, but if they fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick, and visited the prisoner.

Jesus the Messiah certainly has plenty to say about our public life. He certainly has something to say about wealth and poverty and violence and peace and justice and mercy. But we cannot confuse Jesus the Messiah with a political leader and we cannot confuse his kingdom with the power of a nation. America is not the kingdom of God – no nation is. The kingdom of God crosses every boundary that human beings construct, and it includes people from every nation, tribe, and people. Jesus spends an extraordinary amount of his ministry expanding the circle of who belongs, as we were reminded last week in his encounter with the Canaanite woman.

It is a great temptation for us though, to feel the pull towards something that feels more powerful. A sword looks stronger than a cross. Domination can feel more powerful than love. Defeating enemies or enacting vengeance can feel more satisfying than forgiving them. Standing among the halls of the powerful feels more significant than standing among those who have no power at all. Peter certainly understood that temptation. He wanted a Messiah who would win. But instead, Jesus gave him a Messiah who would suffer and die. Peter wanted Jesus to overthrow Rome and set up a new kingdom, but instead, Jesus gave him a Messiah who would expose Rome's violence and refuse to return it in kind. Peter wanted a throne, but Jesus gave him a cross. As my late theology professor, Geoffrey Wainwright always said, "Christ reigns from a tree." That's not the throne we want, and as Christians, we have been trying to trade the cross back for the throne for thousands of years.

There is a story from another time when Christianity became dangerously entangled with nationalism and political power that I think speaks directly to this passage. Franz Jägerstätter was not a famous theologian or bishop. He was a farmer in a tiny Austrian village. He served as the sexton of his local Catholic church. He was really just an ordinary Christian living an ordinary life. But he lived at a time when being an ordinary Christian was becoming increasingly difficult.

In 1938, Nazi Germany annexed Austria. Many Austrians welcomed Hitler. Church leaders were struggling over how to respond, and many Christians accommodated themselves to the new regime. Christian language and national identity became dangerously intertwined. Hitler promised national renewal and a restored greatness. Franz became increasingly convinced that a Christian could not give allegiance to what Hitler represented.

When his village voted on whether Austria should be incorporated into Nazi Germany, Franz was reportedly the only person in the village to dissent. And then the war came. Franz knew that eventually he would be called into military service, and he wrestled deeply with what he should do. He had a wife he loved and three little girls. Refusing military service could mean imprisonment or execution. Either of

those consequences would mean leaving his family without a husband and father. People tried to talk him out of it. Even church leaders advised him that he had responsibilities to his family and should comply. And that's fair, one could understand why. They asked questions like, "What difference could one farmer possibly make against Hitler? Wouldn't it be better to stay alive for his children?"

But Franz had become convinced that there was a question even deeper than whether his resistance would succeed, and it was this: "Who was his Lord?" Eventually, Franz would be required to swear an oath of unconditional obedience to Hitler, which he refused. If Jesus Christ was Lord, Hitler could not be. If the Kingdom of God was his ultimate citizenship, the nation could not be. When he was called into military service in 1943, he reported as ordered, but refused to fight for Hitler. So he was arrested and imprisoned. People still urged him to change his mind. But Franz refused, and on August 9, 1943, at the age of thirty-six, Franz Jägerstätter was executed by guillotine. By almost every worldly measurement, he lost. He didn't stop Hitler, he didn't end the war, he didn't overthrow the government, he didn't live to raise his daughters, he died largely unknown – and yet, he seemed to understand something about confessing Jesus as Messiah. Purportedly his final recorded words before his execution were, "I am completely bound in inner union with the Lord." Franz, to the end, confessed and followed the Messiah who took up to cross and refused to seek power or violence, even to protect his own life.

Franz Jägerstätter could not control what Germany or Austria did. He couldn't control what his own neighbors or other Christians did, but he could decide who his Lord was. When we come back to the passage we heard this morning, ultimately, that is what Jesus is asking the disciples – who do you say that I am? Franz answered with his life – Jesus is Lord.

If Jesus is Lord, the nation is not. If Jesus is Lord, then no flag can command allegiance that belongs to Christ. If Jesus is Lord, then that means sometimes faithfulness will require us to stand part even when everyone around us, including other Christians, is going along.

To confess Jesus as Messiah is to confess a way of life that does not seek to conquer the world, but seeks to take up the cross. Franz Jägerstätter's witness reminds us of how important this is right now.

There are mighty forces that keep asking Christians to worry about whether Christianity has enough power. Do we control enough institutions? Do we have enough influence? Are the right people in office? Are Christians winning?

But Jesus asks some very different questions: Who do you say that I am? Are you following me? Are you taking up the cross? Are you loving your enemies? Are you feeding the hungry?

Franz Jägerstätter never became powerful, but he was faithful. Maybe that is the distinction that Peter, and we, have to learn. The goal of discipleship is simply to follow Christ, the Messiah who exercises his rule through emptying himself. If Jesus really is the Messiah, the Caesar never gets the final word. Jesus does. And sometimes the most powerful Christian witness in the world is just one ordinary person standing before an empire saying, "No. I already have a Lord."