

Lectionary 21A 2017, Matthew 16:13-20, August 27, 2017, Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Kurt S. Strause

An indispensable feature of modern politics is the poll. And not just during the runup to the election, but throughout a politician's career as well. Polls try to determine where people stand: do they approve of the president's performance, are they happy with the way congress is doing its job, what are the future prospects of a particular party or candidate? Often times a politician will decry a particular poll as inaccurate and not to be believed. That's usually when the poll isn't going his or her way. But find a poll that says that candidate is surging in popularity and that poll has the ring of gospel truth. News shows and newspapers rely on polls for their reporting, sometimes even commissioning their own polls to take the pulse of the public.

But politicians aren't the only ones to use polls to determine their strategy. I think we've all had the experience of getting a phone call conducting market research, or maybe even an internet request to take a survey of customer satisfaction after making a purchase. Market research depends upon surveys of some kind or another. When you buy a product often there will be a survey card inside, asking you what your age and gender is, how much your household income is, where you bought the product, who will use it, all kinds of information that helps the marketing people target their product better. Sometimes those phone calls or internet requests can be annoying, but I often like to cooperate on the surveys. I figure they need the information and the person on the other end is just trying to do their job.

We don't think of Jesus engaging in market research or taking polls, but that's exactly what he was doing in our gospel reading this morning. "Who do people say that I am?" He asked the question of his poll takers, the disciples. They were the ones out and among the crowds of people. They kept their ears open and heard the conversations going on; all the speculation about who this amazing and unknown preacher and healer might be. And after a while it came time to find out what the crowds were saying. Now the list of answers all point out that many of the people thought Jesus was a prophet. Somebody like John the Baptist come back from the dead, or Jeremiah, or even Elijah. All of these figures were associated with the ushering in of God's Kingdom and the sending of the Messiah. The Messiah was to be the long awaited, God-anointed king in Jewish thought who would rescue Israel from bondage. Before the Messiah came God would send his prophets once again, to get people ready, to announce the coming king. Apparently many thought Jesus was one of these prophets, sent by God to announce the coming of the Messiah and the beginning of freedom from Roman oppressive rule.

Today we could also take a poll to find out what people think of this Jesus and who they think he is. Indeed, from time to time such polls are taken. And the answers people give are just as varied as they were when this first religious poll was taken. There are those who think of Jesus as the great teacher, a wise sage who teaches us the meaning of morality. Some think of Jesus as a miracle worker, who will magically rescue us in times of trouble. Still others believe Jesus is the founder of the Christian religion, a religion for all the white people of the world. We saw this belief arise in Nazi Germany in the 1930's, and we see it continue in much of the white supremacy movements of our own day.

The point is, there are about as many different views of who this Jesus as there are people. But there is something common which runs through each of them. All want to make Jesus out in our own image and likeness. We want Jesus to be like us. If we value wisdom and learning, then we want Jesus to be a great teacher. If life is full of trials and twists and ups and downs then we want Jesus to be the miracle worker who rescues us in times of trouble. If we

understand the world to be made up of different groups of people, and that these groups ought to remain separate, then Jesus will be pictured as tall, and white and blue-eyed, the ideal man for an ideal people. All of these views and whatever others we might wish to add, all mold Jesus into our likeness, so that Jesus ends up reflecting who we are, and what we value.

When Jesus asked Peter who he believed he was he wasn't just looking for another opinion in the religious poll. And when Peter answered that he believed Jesus was the Messiah, the son of the living God, it wasn't an answer like the others, for several reasons. I already mentioned that Israel was looking for the Messiah, but the Messiah they expected was going to be a mighty military ruler who would lead them in victorious battle against the Romans. Maybe even Peter, boldly making this confession, also expected such a Messiah. Instead this Messiah suffered unjustly, was crucified on a cross and buried. The image everyone else had was a mighty ruler. Instead they got a crucified criminal.

With this Messiah you don't get what you expect. For in his freedom Jesus can't be molded into our image and our expectations. That's right, in his freedom. As the one who was crucified, yet also raised from the dead, Jesus is free from all that would bind him down, all expectations placed upon him, all attempts to shape him into someone he's not. That's what it means to be the Messiah, the one sent by God. The Messiah doesn't lead armies into victory, the Messiah conquers death itself. And in this victory over death Jesus is free to love, even the entire world if he so chooses.

With Jesus the difference between what I will call "religiosity" and "faith" is drawn clear. Religiosity is the attempt to mold Jesus into our likeness, to make him out to be what we want him to be. Safe, domestic, hardly ever intrusive into our lives, except when we want him to be, maybe when we're in trouble. Christian faith, however, must be different. For faith perceives a man who is free from all such attempts, who won't be shaped into our desires. Quite the opposite. Faith perceives a man who shapes us into his life. As we grow in faith, we begin to see that it's not Jesus who is becoming like us, but we are the ones who, in very small ways perhaps, become more like him. Our lives take on the characteristics of this crucified and risen Messiah, the one no one expected. We find ourselves able to love those who the rest of the world despises, able to forgive when others would hold a grudge, able to resist a temptation others might indulge. I didn't say we could do all these things perfectly, but as faith is allowed to take hold in ever greater ways we can see these things happening. It is Paul says in our second lesson today, "do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-what is good and acceptable and perfect. Faith in the man of freedom means being transformed into the likeness and image of Jesus.

I want to say a few words about Peter and his confession of faith. Jesus turned the religious poll taking around, so that the one gathering the information was also called to give his answer. Jesus also asks us, "Who do you say that I am." But while the question is asked of each of us, the answer we give is never given alone. For our confession is built upon the confession of the church throughout the ages, beginning with this first confession of Peter. Indeed, the church is built upon Peter and his confession, which means the church is a community of living witnesses. We are never alone in our struggle to live the Christian life. We have examples both from the past, and from around us on what it means to be shaped into the life of the Messiah. I always like the play on words Jesus makes with Peter's name; for in Greek the name Peter literally means "rock." Jesus is actually making a little pun here; he says, "Your name is 'Rocky', and upon this Rock I will build my church." When we confess, as Peter did, and

remember that this was a man far from perfect, even in his confession, we can have that rock solid foundation for our own faith.

We who confess Jesus as the Son of the living God, the Messiah, are being transformed into his image and likeness. He is the man of freedom, free to love and serve the world, and just so are we free to love and serve also. We have many who have gone before us, beginning with Peter and all of the apostles and disciples and saints and martyrs and any who seek to live as Jesus lives. Upon the rock of their faith we may build ours, trusting in Jesus who helps us become like him. Amen.