

St. Brendan's
Sunday Aug. 23, 2026
Matthew 16:13-20
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Paul's letter in the Romans passage that we just heard begins, "*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God...*" What in the world does Paul mean here? We might wonder how can our bodies be a living sacrifice acceptable to God? I think Matthew might have the answer.

Today's gospel begins by letting us know that Jesus and his disciples have traveled to the district known as Caesarea Philippi, formerly known as Naphtali. Around 20 BC this region and its surrounding area was given to King Herod by Augustus. King Herod built up the area and even built a temple that honored the cult of Caesar. After he died, the place passed to King Phillip who further built it up and renamed it basically Phillip's Caesarville to flatter his patron, Caesar Augustus.

So, it is in the shadow of this imperially charged pro-Roman kingdom, this city of power politics as usual that Jesus chooses to ask his disciples two questions. First, he asks, "*Who do the people say that the Son of Man is?*" and then "*Who do you say that I am?*"

To the first question, the disciples suggest that maybe the people think Jesus is John, maybe Elijah, maybe Jeremiah, all luminaries in the ancient world. Like it's a no-brainer. But when Jesus says but who do you say I am, Simon Peter blurts

out, “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*” Like that’s the no-brainer.

Part of me is saying Peter, Peter, Peter. You’re always putting your foot in your mouth. While the other disciples stayed safe and threw out a few names, you, once again dove right in...like always you speak before you think... and yet, Simon Peter’s answer pleases Jesus because it doesn’t come from his head. It doesn’t come from something he’s heard other people say. It doesn’t come from a book nor is it hearsay. Jesus knows it can only have come from a personal encounter with God.

And I suspect that’s exactly what Paul was getting at when he spoke about offering our bodies as a living sacrifice to God. Paul seems to be saying that only by being willing to open our hearts and our minds, that is our whole being to God, can we truly serve God’s purposes. It is about embodied faith ...that is, experiencing Jesus with our whole being. It’s not about just telling people about Jesus but about living the gospel. It’s about doing our best to keep our eyes on the things of God, not the things of business as usual. Jesus knows his destiny has nothing to do with the political power or the earthly riches, the temples and the land the Romans strive to amass. Standing there amidst all the glare and grandeur of the Roman Empire, Jesus needs to know his disciples are also clear about this.

Jesus praises Simon Peter” *Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah*” and goes on to say Peter is the rock he will build the church on... “*And on this rock, I will build my church.*” **I** is the important word here. That is...it is Jesus and only Jesus who can build up the church, the rest of us can help by serving

him but we can't do it on our own. This church will be founded on Jesus' identity as the Messiah of the living God. A living God whose love has no boundaries.... who cannot be contained or limited. How do we build a church on the truth of Jesus' identity as God's Son that not even as Matthew puts it, the gates of Hades can overpower?

In a recent article in *The Christian Century*, Elizabeth Palmer comments that while we in our generation were raised with some formation, many young people today are content with the idea of church as community, church as do-gooder, church as candles and hymns, but Jesus wants us to go deeper. Church should not be a list of things we need to do...go to church, serve on some committee, raise money for some cause.

Jesus wants our lives to speak the truth louder than our words. That is the work we are called to do. We must choose to love the other as much as we love ourselves. We must choose to live a life that cares for the widows and orphans, that cares for immigrants and the disabled, that cares for the homeless and the hungry, a life that respects the rights of women, a life that does not turn a blind eye to anyone in need. The church Jesus envisioned would shine a light in every dark corner.

We need to experience our faith in the entirety of our being. For as Paul says in Acts, (17:28) addressing a crowd of Greek philosophers in Athens, *"For in him we live and move and have our being..."*

I got a phone call two weeks ago from a former parishioner of mine. She was one of those people who I wondered if she gave

too much of herself to the church. When I asked her about her life I found out she had been a nurse in the Vietnam war and continued nursing in different countries after she came back. And then one day, she thought she sensed Jesus tell her that it was time she nursed the church. And not long after that is when I got to know her. She had told me then that she loved caring for the church.

The day she called me her voice was particularly light-hearted and there was something so upbeat in her manner. We chatted for a moment and then she told me she wanted to give me one of her Navajo rugs as she knew I had spent time years ago out West with the Navajo.

Before I could say anything, she said I need to get my house in order. It's my heart. The doc said she can't fix it. So I don't have much time. But I'm fine. Please don't be sad. I'm ready. Honestly, I've been privileged to serve Jesus here and now he's taking me home. I'll be with him soon.

That was when I realized she gave so much of herself to the church because she simply loved Jesus. Like Peter she embodied her faith. She was really fine...maybe finer than any of us.

And why not. The keys Jesus gives Peter are to a kingdom, that values justice and compassion, forgiveness and mercy, a kingdom that wants peace. What Jesus wants is for his disciples and for us is to lay claim to this kingdom. My parishioner had done just that.

The strength of the church stems from knowing who Jesus really is. No matter how big or small the congregation is, no matter if the paint is peeling and the windows let in the cold, no matter how imperfect that church seems, the truth is, the church has at its core a power greater than any political power. So let us continue to build the church on the belief that there is a living, speaking, incarnating God.

Are we willing to risk experiencing Jesus fully? Are we willing to give body and soul for the love of God that no one in this universe can hold back from us? Amen