

Sermon preached by
The Reverend Hope H. Eakins
on August 27, 2017, Proper 16, Year A
at the 5 p.m. service
at St. John's Episcopal Church, West Hartford, Connecticut

Who is he, this Donald Trump? And how do you find out the truth about him? And, by the way, do you remember Anthony Scaramucci? How did you know who the Mooch really was? Did you get your answers from FOX News or CNN, read Time or Newsweek? Are your facts true or are they alternative facts? I have some opinions myself, but what do YOU say? Do you have a foundation for your belief? or do you just accept the judgments of social media?

Who do you say that I am, asked Jesus? Jesus did not ask that question because he was concerned about his reputation. He asked it because he was concerned about his disciples. What the disciples believed could not change Jesus, but what they believed could change them.

So who is he, this One we call Lord?

(Congregation responds)

Every once in a while, I hear someone say, "It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere." Now you may sincerely believe that cyanide is not poisonous, but if you swallow it, you will find out that mistaken beliefs can have fatal consequences. Hindus sincerely believe that some people are untouchable because they come from the wrong caste, but if you live that way, you will either despair because you are untouchable or become awfully arrogant about your social position. What we believe really matters.

Each of us has a set of beliefs. We are not born with them ready made, but we start accumulating them in childhood, some consciously and some unconsciously. Some of our beliefs support each other and some contradict each other, so we end up with a complex and intricate faith. I don't think we make most of our selections by a deliberate intellectual process, we sort of absorb them or catch them like chickenpox, and they become the basis of how we live our lives.

If we believe that other people are out to get us, we live defensively, always on our guard. If we believe that the survival of the fittest is a social good as well as a biological truth, then we won't bother to resuscitate people after heart attacks and we won't put preemies in incubators.

Christians believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth. So we believe that God is in charge, and that we are only stewards and caretakers of God's earth, with a duty to care for God's creation, including the ozone layer, including the mentally ill, including victims of famine in Africa. We believe that since we have one Father, we belong to one family and we all deserve honor

and respect. We believe in Jesus Christ who came down from heaven for our salvation, and so we believe that we are worth saving, that we are loved and forgiven by a tender and gracious God. We believe in the Holy Spirit, believe that we are not left as orphans on this earth, but have the power of God within us and around us and among us. We believe in the Church, believe that through Christ's ministers we are fed with Christ's own Body and through Holy Baptism we are sealed as Christ's own forever. We believe that there is life eternal and that nothing can separate us from the love of God, nothing.

We believe that our Christian faith is founded in the Scriptures, yet the Bible is not a clear-cut statement of right belief, so it needs interpretation in the Christian community. For example, in today's Epistle, Paul exhorts us to "present our bodies as a living sacrifice," and since those sacred words of Scripture carry different meanings for different people at different times, we believe in the wisdom of the community of faith to interpret God's revealed Word for us today. We find truth in the body of Christ when we come together here to worship, to question, to love and forgive each other, but we are a fallible community because we are a human community. We find signs of truth in nature, in God's creation, but they are sometimes hard to interpret. We find truth in the Church because when Peter was given the keys of God's kingdom, he was given the responsibility of guarding the faith. And so the Church continues to wrestle with questions of faith and morals, struggling to hold fast to Christ's teaching and not to be blown by the winds of change, but that often makes the Church ponderous in her ways and slow to correct error.

Who do you say that I am, asked Jesus, and when Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus told Peter and sternly ordered all the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Jesus' order is puzzling. I think that Jesus gave it because he didn't want people to think he had come with power and might to save God's people from Roman rule. Jesus wasn't looking for votes, for people to applaud when he worked his magic. He was looking for followers. Jesus wasn't trying to form a religious right who would have all the answers; he was trying to make followers who would come together and say their prayers as they asked the questions.

Who do you say that Jesus is? The answer cannot come from the clergy or your parents or your friends or that wonderful Sunday School teacher who means so much to you. The answer must come from you. And if you can answer with Peter, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," then you will follow Jesus. You will read God's great love story in the Scriptures and you will say your prayers and listen for Jesus' voice. And if you feel called to feed the hungry, you will go cook at Loaves and Fishes and find Christ there. If you think you might teach our children their faith in the church school, you will come and hear complicated theology shaped by a little mouth into words that make your heart sing. If you ask God to send visitors to your lonely Mom, you might be led to lead worship at the Hughes Home, visiting other people's Moms. Whatever you do, if you follow where Jesus leads, you will find joy.