

Beyond the Labels: Letting Love Flow

Matthew 16:13-20

Intro

This first passage allows us to catch a glimpse of who the people of Israel thought this person of Jesus was. The way that they are able to enunciate their understandings is by making comparisons, if not direct connections, to people who have come before.

The comparisons are rather flattering.

Some thought that Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead. And why not? They both talked about the end of the age, the coming judgment, and the establishment of God's kingdom.

Some said that Jesus was Elijah. The reason? There was a Jewish tradition that believed that Elijah would reappear on earth in the last days to prepare for the coming of God.

The last comparison is to Jeremiah and this is because both he and Jesus talked about the establishment of a new covenant. These are all good answers but Jesus wants to know who they, his disciples, his friends, think he is.

It is at this point that Simon Peter steps up and makes the pronouncement, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." It is from this statement of faith that Simon receives his new name and the way that he has been talked about since: Peter – The Rock. One of the things that we are able to take away from this passage is that how we view and understand Jesus depends on our point of view.

Admittedly, that view might not be correct, (Jesus was not John the Baptist, Elijah or Jeremiah), but in our limited understandings there are kernels of truth. These kernels, when collected and looked at through eyes of faith will begin to show us who God is through how He works, and in doing so who we are to God.

The scripture reads this way.

Matthew 16:13-20

¹³ Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." ²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Romans 12:1-8

Intro

This second passage gives us Paul's understanding of how, through our knowledge and relationship with Christ, the view of our own lives is changed. Paul lets us know that through Christ, our lives are transformed so that we are able to give of ourselves according to the ways that you have been blessed. This newfound knowledge of self is derived from our relationship in Christ, with our connection to the Almighty. This passage reminds us that we need to let God change the way that we think about ourselves and how we live in the world remembering that God is able to move in the world in ways that fit perfectly into the way that we understand our faith...and He also moves in ways that allow our understanding of God's greatness to be broadened ever further. The scripture reads this way.

Romans 12:1-8 (CEV)

12 Dear friends, God is good. So I beg you to offer your bodies to him as a living sacrifice, pure and pleasing. That's the most sensible way to serve God. ² Don't be like the people of this world, but let God change the way you think. Then you will know how to do everything that is good and pleasing to him.

³ I realize how kind God has been to me, and so I tell each of you not to think you are better than you really are. Use good sense and measure yourself by the amount of faith that God has given you. ⁴ A body is made up of many parts, and each of them has its own use. ⁵ That's how it is with us. There are many of us, but we each are part of the body of Christ, as well as part of one another.

⁶ God has also given each of us different gifts to use. If we can prophesy, we should do it according to the amount of faith we have. ⁷ If we can serve others, we should serve. If we can teach, we should teach. ⁸ If we can encourage others, we should encourage them. If we can give, we should be generous. If we are leaders, we should do our best. If we are good to others, we should do it cheerfully.

"Beyond the Labels: Letting Love Flow"

So I had an interesting experience this past week. On Monday afternoon, I loaded up Austin up to spend a couple of days watching the baseball team that he is a part of compete in a 50 team tournament up near Cooperstown, New York. I went up expecting Austin and I to help encourage the team on on.

What ended up happening is that they encouraged me.

We pulled into the All Star Village about 25 minutes after their fourth game of the tournament had started. I rolled Austin down the ridiculous long hill and as we're walking up to the correct field one of the other boy's moms comes up to me and after greeting us both shows Austin his jersey. He's immediately smiling as it slips on over his head and he's chomping at the bit to see his friends play. As soon as I get around the fence where his friends are able to see him, there are multiple shouts of 'Austin! Austin!'

But they're in the middle of the game.

Well, a couple of batters later and the opposing team needs to change their pitcher at which point all of guys on the team that Austin is a part of come running around the fence to say hi and get a fist bump...and then the umpires halt the game so that they can get their picture with all of the NJ Rippers as they welcome their teammate.

That's not something you see at baseball games.

The kids were excited to see their teammate and friend and the umps wanted to celebrate with the kids in that excitement. As a dad I stood there (taking a picture) thinking to myself, 'they are so showing us a positive example of how to be, of how to live with one another'. That moment set the tone for the next few days and that sort of positivity reached out and affected more than a few folks who were a part of that community for the week. Those kids were influential...to so many people and in so many ways. I know that how they respond to Austin has affected me.

The truth is that influential people are everywhere. They come in all ages, shapes and sizes and they are able to touch lives, to touch our lives, in countless numbers of ways.

Paul is also speaking of someone who has been very significant in his life and in the lives of those who are reading this letter. Of course, the person that Paul is speaking of is Jesus. As we all know, Paul has personally experienced just how noteworthy this Jesus is.

In Acts we hear of Paul's transformation from Christian persecutor to Apostle as he encounters the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. We read how he falls to the ground, hears the voice of Jesus telling him to stop tormenting Christians, and is blinded for the next three days as he waits for this voice to return so that he might know what he is to do with the rest of his life.

Paul knows what it is like to be affected by someone in such a way that your life is no longer the same and he's letting his readers know that when God begins to flow through their life, that they too will be affected, maybe in unexpected ways, maybe in ways that don't fit the mold, but in a manner that will ultimately make sense, revealing just how all-encompassing this God who we worship is.

Beyond that, Paul pushes the fact that we will be transformed according to the gifts that we have been blessed with. These gifts will be needed to serve so that all those whom we come into contact with, and absolutely those whom we may walk with in the faith, might be served. This is why we are told, "If we can prophesy, we should do it according to the amount of faith we have. If we can serve others, we should serve. If we can teach, we should teach. If we can encourage others, we should encourage them. If we can give, we should be generous. If we are leaders, we should do our best. If we are good to others, we should do it cheerfully."

It isn't "if you can do something then think about using that gift"; it's "if you can, then you should".

Basically, if you have a way that you can be a blessing unto others, then there is nothing that should stop you from doing so.

It isn't a formula where there are a whole lot of variables.

You are who you are.

God is working through you. Whether or not you recognize that leading as God...well, that can be up for debate. However, from a position of faith, we are able to understand that love, regardless of where it comes from and who it comes through, is a sign that the Spirit of God is at work. So again, God is working through you to use the gifts you have to care for others. Now go, go and use those gifts

It doesn't matter what how the world may see you, or what label the world may hang on you, if you have a gift, use it for through that use God is able to reach out and love the world. Maybe in traditional ways. Maybe in ways that are anything but.

No matter the case, I firmly believe that the use of those gifts, allowing God to work through those gifts, will not only affect others, it will begin to change you personally as well.

Again, from a place of faith, I see that as the Holy Spirit not only 'speaking' through us, but also 'speaking' to us allowing us to be affected, to be transformed, even just a little bit.

One of the questions that I ask students who go through the Confirmation Class is this: what are you good at? What do you like to do? How can God work through those gifts to show his love in the world?

There are many times when the kids will look back at me with confusion in their eyes and say something like this: 'I like math. I like science. I like video games. I like sports'. God can use that! God can use all of that. God can use that through your life to leave an influential mark on others...and that is regardless of any worldly tag that you have claimed or has been laid upon you. God can use whatever gifts you have!

Again, I'm up in the middle of nowhere New York for a baseball tournament with a bunch of really good 12 year old ball players. Several of these guys are going to star on their high school teams when they get to that age. Maybe even beyond that. I am sure that several of them will receive the label of 'jock', or whatever their generation refers to the athletic kids as.

And yet each of them, in their own ways, made sure to include a teammate who watched from his wheelchair over in the stands. They used the skills that they have to show a care and concern that is so much larger than themselves. Jimmy, Griff, Derrick, Andrew, Ryan, Sean, Logan, Nick, Noah, Jack, and Brett, they all used what they had and in doing so showed everyone who was watching a still better way of being with one another, or caring for one another.

Here's how I know that their treatment was seen and affected others: because of how the other kids began to respond to Austin. Now I get that some of that is Austin (he uses his gifts to make an impact on folks), but a lot of that was other kids watching the NJ Rippers and how they not only played but how they lived with each other. Kids that had never met Austin would come up to us, give a fist bump and say something like, 'I'll be rooting for your team...unless we play you, ...but every other time we will!'

Look, there are plenty of negative youth sports stories that are out there, and we certainly saw moments of that at this tournament. But the love that was shared between those teammates was something that could be seen, it could be felt, and it left an impact.

Some people might look at those kids and see a group of youth athletes. I look at them and see young men who are using the skills and gifts they have to love others the best they can. By doing so they impact others, and they start to transform themselves (even if it's just a little bit) by sharing God's love through their gifts, through their skills.

People may look at you, and label you. You may look at yourself, and accept that, or some other label.

Jesus had labels too. But the only one that he accepted was the one that saw the world through eyes of faith. Peter took the different worldly perspectives and started to piece them together until he was able to proclaim, 'you are the son of the living God.'

Don't be limited by labels.

Instead, use the gifts, the skills, the interests that you have. Use them for as you do God's love will flow through them affecting and changing others; affecting and changing you. Others may not understand that it's God at work, heck, there are days when we might not understand it as God at work, and yet it is. When love and care are present...God is there...until such time as we are ultimately able to realize another label, one that truly describes who we are, 'child of God'.

After Sermon Prayer

God, there are so many times when we limit ourselves because of how we see ourselves, because of how we think the world sees us. Help us to move beyond those tags, recognizing that You are able to move through any and all of the skills and gifts that You have blessed us with. As we use these gifts, not only will Your love begin to affect others, changing them (even just a ;little bit), but it will also change us, change us until the day when we are able to claim our true label: Your child. God, thank You for the ways that You have blessed us; thank You for the ways You bless others through us; thank You for the ways that You are changing us...even today. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.