

Jesus Uncensored Sermon Series:
“SON OF GOD”

Matthew 16:13-19 – Fifth Sunday of Lent

Dr. Andrew Wolfe, Trinity United Methodist Church
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There are so many TV talk shows these days, that to be successful, you have to find your niche – do something that will separate you from others. *The Maury Show* has evidently decided that their niche is the lowest rung on the ladder by appealing to the tawdry and sensational. One of the recurring formats for *Maury* is to have guests on his show who want to know who the fathers of their children are. The children undergo DNA tests, and then the mothers and suspected fathers are invited to appear on the show. In front of millions of people, the results of the tests are announced.

It is not a pretty scene. Usually, the men are ecstatic if they are proved not to be the father – glad to escape any responsibility. The women are usually devastated – having exposed themselves to ridicule. And the children, well, no one seems to care. They are just the props for entertainment. They are left not knowing who their fathers are.

All of us yearn to know how we are related. Where we come from, where we belong. All of us want to be able to answer the question, “Who’s your daddy?”

That question was even asked of Jesus. Who do you think you are? By what authority do you do these things? Jesus himself even asked his disciples this question one day. In Caesarea Philippi, before Jesus began the journey to Jerusalem, Jesus asked those in whom he had invested much of himself, “Who do you say that I am?” It was Peter who answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God?” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you Simon Bar Jonah! For flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”

As he died on the cross, the Roman Centurion who stood watching confessed, “Truly this man was God’s Son.” Mark begins his gospel with the sentence, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

The consistent claim of the New Testament is that Jesus was something more than a teacher or prophet, something more than a folk healer, something other than a revolutionary. That something more was described by using the title “Son of God.” The church would later define the relationship of the Son to the Father using philosophical terms. But here within the New Testament the language isn’t that of philosophical speculation, but from the language of experience. In and through the man Jesus, people experienced something...or maybe better said...someone who they identified as God.

Were they right? What does it mean or matter to say that Jesus is the Son of God? What difference does it make?

A few weeks before he died Benjamin Franklin responded to a question concerning his

faith: *As to Jesus of Nazareth...I have...some doubts as to his divinity tho' it is a question that I do not dogmatize about, having never really studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, than I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble. I see no harm, however, in its being believed, if that belief has good consequences of making his doctrines more respected and observed."*

Franklin speaks for many in his day, and ours, who believe that the question of Jesus' divinity is largely irrelevant. What counts is what Jesus came to teach us. The message is valid irregardless of the messenger's identity.

One of the books that Oprah selected for her book club last year was *A Million Little Pieces*. The book purported to be the true story of James Frey telling about how he survived a life of drugs, alcohol and crime. It was a gripping and moving story. But upon investigation, it turned out that much of what Frey wrote was not true – it was fabricated, made up. At first the attempt was made to try to say that it didn't matter if the story was not exactly factual, the message of the story was still valid. But people weren't buying it. The truth of the story is wrapped up in the trustworthiness of the storyteller. You can't separate the message from the messenger. The confession that Jesus is the Son of God matters because it validates both the message and the messenger. You can't have one without the other.

The attempt is often made to separate the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history. The Christ of faith with titles like Son of God were an invention of people like Paul and had nothing to do with the real Jesus of history. We need to separate the claims from the man, the message from the messenger. That way it makes no difference who Jesus was. What matters is what he said.

But a clear reading of the Gospels does not let us do this. Scholar N.T. Wright and others have convincingly shown that Jesus had a firm sense of his vocation from God. By both his words and his deeds, Jesus did only what God could do in forgiving sins, in challenging the temple establishment. Jesus proclaimed that in and through him, the Kingdom was being inaugurated. Jesus believed he was God's messiah. He believed that he would win the messianic victory by taking humankind's fate upon himself and going to the cross. Jesus believed that in doing these things, he was not just pointing to, or talking about, but actually was making God's rule present, bringing God's salvation to pass. "He believed himself called to be and do, what only God did and was." (*Jesus and the Identity of God*, NT Wright).

This means that Jesus spoke God's truth when he said in the synagogue, "This day the scripture has been fulfilled..." He spoke truth when he offered forgiveness to sinners. His actions were truth when he welcomed outcasts, made room for the marginalized, and broke through boundaries. His words and actions are not self-authenticating. They mean nothing, have no validity, no claim upon us. In fact, make little sense to us, *unless* they are the words and actions of God.

Or, C. S. Lewis in his book, *Mere Christianity*, drives the point home when he wrote that "A man who was merely a man, and said the sorts of things Jesus said, wouldn't be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic or a liar." Either Jesus was, and is, the Son of God, or he is a mad man or a deceiver. He hasn't left us the option of making him into simply a teacher whose message is separate from his person. He was crazy, a liar, or his words *are* God's words. His will

is God's will. His claims *are* God's claims upon us. To know him *is* to know God. You can't have Jesus of Nazareth who is *not also* the Christ of God.

And that's the second reason it matters when we profess Jesus as Son of God. If he is who his words and actions say that he is, then "Jesus is God spelling Himself out in language that human beings can understand." (S. D. Gordon.) When we look at Jesus, we see all of God we could ever hope to see. We see God as God is.

George Buttrick, former chaplain at Harvard, recalls that students would sometimes come into his office, plop down on a chair and declare, "I don't believe in God." Buttrick would give this disarming reply, "Sit down and tell me what kind of God you don't believe in. I probably don't believe in that God either." And then Buttrick would talk about Jesus, the corrective to all our assumptions about God.

People mean all sorts of things when they say the word "God." For some the word refers to an absentee landlord, who made the world and leaves us to our own devices. Others think of God as the spirit in all of us. Others a stern judge waiting to catch us. But none of these is the God of Jesus. The God of Jesus is not static, unmoved and uncaring. This God is active, compassionate, passionate, on the move in the world, working to redeem and restore creation.

Pastor/Preacher Barbara Taylor Brown shares the story of the day her husband and a friend named Tommy, went duck hunting. They had been out all day in Tommy's boat, sharing the care and pleasure of it, when it came time to pack up and go home. Motoring back to the launch, they heaved the bow of the boat up on the river bank and began to haul their guns and decoys back to the car. On their second trip to the river, however, the boat was gone. Looking downstream, they saw it floating away about ten feet from the bank. So they dropped everything and ran after it. But the closer they got, the further it moved out into the main current of the river. First 10 feet, then 12, then 20, gaining speed as it went. Finally came the moment of truth. As cold and tired as they were, it was clear that one of them would have to jump in and swim after the boat. They looked at each others and both knew who it would be. "It wasn't my boat," Brown's husband said, but stood on the shore cheering Tommy on.

For some, God is the one who stands on the shore. But the God of Jesus is the one who jumps into the water to save the boat. The God of Jesus doesn't let injustice stand. This God doesn't leave sin unforgiven or a sinner lost. The God of Jesus leaves behind the 99 to rescue the one. This God welcomes outcasts, touches the untouchables, loves the loveless. This God never gives up on us or gives in to destructive and demonic forces. This God lifts up the lowly, casts down the mighty, comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable.

When Christians say the word, they mean nothing else other than the God whose will and purpose we see acted out in Jesus of Nazareth. In Fact, it is only in and through Jesus that we have anything to say about God: the one who was among us as fully human, sharing our lives, our temptations, our sorrows and our death, the one who taught us with authority, the one who healed us and restored, the one who called us friend. When we look at this Jesus, we say with awe, wonder and gratitude, not only, *Ecce homo*, "Behold the man," but *Ecce Deus*, "Behold God."

And that puts limits on what can be claimed about this God. Those who hold up signs

declaring God hates certain people are not speaking for the God of Jesus. When we try to limit God's love to the few and the chosen, it is not the God of Jesus of whom we speak. When we use God to support inequality and inequity, we have left behind the God of Jesus. This God is not simply who we say he is, or want him to be. We cannot make this God into our mascot giving his stamp of approval to our pet projects. The God we profess is a particular God. This God has his own agenda which we see acted out in Jesus.

When we call Jesus Son of God, we are not engaging in idle philosophical speculation. We are declaring that no matter how much death and darkness, sin and brokenness seem to rule this world, they don't. These are not the things that are finally real. What is finally are the freedom, love, joy and salvation we see in the words and actions of Jesus. And that matters a great deal.

It also matters, because in answering the question of Jesus' identity, we are also discovering the answer to our identity. If Jesus is Son of God, then we know who our daddy is. The relationship between God and Jesus is lived out by Jesus. He calls together a group of disciples, he extends welcome to outcasts and sinners, he steps over the line to redraw the boundary of grace. In all that he does, Jesus is creating a new humanity, a new family of God.

Paul says it directly, "When the time had fully come, God sent forth his son, born of woman to redeem those under the law, so that we might receive adoption as son and daughters. So through God we are no longer slaves, but sons and daughters." (Gal 4:5-6)

We don't need Maury and his DNA tests to tell us who our father is. In and through Jesus, we become children of God. We *have* a father. We *have* a family. We know who we are and where we belong...now and eternally.

In the musical review *For Heaven's Sake*, Helen Kromer sums up what this means:

I'm nothing, I'm nobody, no one,
 I'm something in Christ who's in me;
 And I'll put on His flesh
 And I'll walk in His bones
 And A part of His body I'll be

If you are looking for a paternity test, here it is: Jesus is Son of God and we...well...we are his brothers and sisters.