

16th Pentecost Sermon
September 12, 2021

The valley lifts and narrows gradually from the Sea of Galilee toward Mount Hermon with the Jordan River flowing down its center. The valley is lush and fertile. Many villages and towns dotted the valley as one travels to the place called Caesarea Philippi. At the cliff that is right above the town, there was the temple to Pan, the half goat half man epicurean deity of the Greeks. There was also a temple dedicated to Caesar. In the pagan worship, once a year, mimicking what God commanded long before for the Jews to do for Yom Kippur, a sacrifice would be made for the sake of the prosperity of the people. The place of the sacrifice was called the gates of hades, or death.

Jesus was on His way in this place and asked, “Who do people say that I am?” This question continues to this day. Who is Jesus?

Each week, we answer the question, but until any one of us answers the question for ourselves, what we do here is nothing less than practice religion. Until the reality of Jesus, who He is and the meaning of the salvation He offers goes into us, it cannot do fully what our Lord intends.

The wisdom of the Lord is in His creation. In our day, we have become increasingly arrogant in our theories, such that we often assume we know when, in fact, we do not. We live in a very so-called scientific age, but let us begin with understanding what science really is. It's base is observable and repeatable experiments. I do this and every time, that happens. We can record that and repeat it. Even if every question we could ask which science could answer, it still would come nowhere close to answering the question of why, or even how. It can do nothing with what is in history, for although for those ignorant of history will repeat the mistakes, history is locked into the moments of time in which it happens. For history, we have evidence. That is why our legal system is built upon evidence. A criminal may leave behind DNA which establishes connection with the scene of a crime – and science can prove this – but it takes evidence to establish whether or not the criminal is guilty of the crime. Even then, in a trial jury, it is to establish beyond a reasonable doubt whether or not the criminal is guilty. Sometimes, even with science, we get this wrong.

Fools hate knowledge. Knowledge is the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom is what the Lord has used to create creation. There is a purpose for everything under heaven. There are things that are terrifying, but that does not make them evil. There are things that we call wonderful, but that does not make them good. The Lord has given us counsel. For those who receive it, He offers salvation. For those who do not heed it, there is reproof. Even if it takes us being led down the path of temptation in order to reach the place of repentance and submission, our Lord has laid out before everyone the opportunity to come into His wisdom.

The Greek word for wisdom is Sophia. We get the word sophistry from this word. It is the pondering of wisdom. The Holy Spirit is sometimes called Sophia, or wisdom. The Lord grants wisdom to those who seek it in His name. This is not a matter of intelligence, but of understanding. Sometimes children understand things better than adults.

A small girl was at the fence watching as a crew was gathered around trying to figure out how to extract an oversized truck that jammed into a bridge. The engineers were talking about cutting away the bridge. The workers were talking about cutting the truck trailer apart to free the truck. The girl called out, “Why don't you let the air out of the tires?” With all of their education and experience, the simple and wise answer was not discerned.

The second year of schooling for High School and college is called the sophomore year, Sophomore means “Wise fool.” In other words, you now know enough to pretend you know. But do you really? There are two more years to go, so obviously there is more, so one who is wise will not pretend they know more than they actually know.

Think about our contemporary world. How many times do people say, “I know this or that.” Do they really? Probably not. They have just heard things and they are repeating it. Do you actually know? I do not actually know what is going on in Afghanistan. I only understand the situation from what others have been saying. Whether or not certain things are true or false may come our with the evidence of history. But, in our day, we are quick to jump on a bandwagon and run off as if we knew.

In the first century, most folk neither believed Caesar was a god, nor the Jesus is God. The pollution came with acceptance of something in order to get along. Only the Christians understood that a little leaven leavens the whole lump and therefore would not tolerate even a little compromise when it came to Jesus.

This brings us back to Jesus. The most important question we will ever answer for ourselves is the question of who Jesus is. In our modern world, each of us tends to take a little information and let that be the basis of our understanding which may or may not be wisdom. There are really only two responses to the answer of who Jesus is. He has said plainly that He and the Father are One. He said He is God. Wisdom will not allow someone to say He is a great teacher, but not God. For if Jesus is not God, then He is a liar. If He is a liar, we should dismiss the whole thing and move on. But, if He is God, then, like Thomas, the only option is to fall at His feet and declare, “My Lord and God.” Sadly, I see too many who want to treat Jesus as a good teacher and go some distance, but not fall to their knees. Jesus has left us no wiggle room. It is one way or the other. He even teaches us in Matthew 25 the difference between those who pretend and those who live in the understanding that He is our Lord and God.

When Jesus was baptized at the river Jordan, the voice of the Father was heard by the faithful, “This is my beloved Son, listen to Him.” He offers before us the path of walking in salvation so that we too may hear, “Well done good and faithful servant.” We will only hear those words if we accept the Word made flesh who has walked among us as the only true and revealed God through whom we can live with eternal life in, through, and with Him before us.

The world still asks, “What are we to make of Jesus?” The real question for we who believe is, “What will He make of us?” We can join with the world, trying to shut Him up, living the life we choose to live, or we can fall at His feet and worship Him. When all is said and done in this age, these are the only two options.

Let me make this as clear as I know how. The world lies because it is in rebellion against the God who created all things. God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – which we shall speak in the creed – has come to rescue, that is, save, those who will come into His offer of salvation. That path mean dying to ourselves – taking up our cross – and following Jesus wherever He may lead us and by whatever path He chooses to set before us. There is not another way. He is the way. Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed, the Christ, God in the flesh. The way to God is through God, in God, and by His creating action in those who believe.

Let us set aside all this world’s pondering and hear the simple truth that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away our rebellion so that we may be forever united with the God who created each one of us in His image, for His purpose, and to His glory. Join with the faithful of all ages and from your heart declare, “Thou art the Christ!” Amen.