

Reflection for the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
Matthew 16: 18-20
August 23, 2020
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Jesus is Master Teacher and Leader

As a former teacher, I am inspired by gospel accounts that present Jesus as the Master Teacher and admire the brilliance of his techniques. As a program director, I have always tried to emulate Jesus' leadership approaches. Today's Gospel from Matthew is one of my favorite scripture encounters.

We know that the gospels, written some years after the death of Jesus to provide eyewitness accounts of his ministry, offer no superfluous details. Therefore, the questions that Jesus poses to his disciples while they are visiting the region of Caesarea Philippi, are not meant to just initiate casual conversation.

The disciples' response to the question "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" and their repetition of what "some people say," (Matthew 16:13-14) suggest that there are people in the Caesarea Philippi community in need of knowing the truth about the Messiah—some of the disciples also have this need. The scene becomes a "teaching moment" and begs another question: who will be responsible for religious instruction, for carrying on the saving mission of Jesus in the embryonic faith community once Jesus is no longer physically with the disciples?

The scene also becomes a "leadership moment." Scripture scholars tell us that Jesus is leading the apostles to a personal understanding of and profession of faith in who he is. "But who do you say that I am?" Peter appears to come to understand when he professes, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," (vs.16) a truth that has come to Peter through his association and personal encounters with Jesus. As a follower of Jesus, Peter's insight is a revelation from Jesus' heavenly Father (vs. 17).

In making his profession of faith to Jesus in the presence of the other disciples, Peter has a new identity—he is the rock upon which Jesus will build his church and he is given the keys, the power, to assume this role. What makes this scene so remarkable for all Christians called to discipleship is that we know, and surely Jesus knew, that Peter was far from being a perfect human being. Even with his strong faith, his sincerity, and his deep love of the Christ, he could still deny Jesus three times.

Like Peter each one of us has the capacity to be a great believer and at the same time to be a great sinner. Jesus teaches us that we are called to go out to our communities and reveal his saving Presence in our world. Even though we are flawed human beings, Jesus' leadership care and forgiving graces are with us. If we are open to learning more about our faith and if we encounter Jesus in the events of each day, then we too have the keys to carry on the saving mission of the Christ.