

# ST BART'S

A Sermon by The Reverend Clayton Crawley

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## Carrying the Truth of Christ During the Pandemic

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, August 23, 2020*

*The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost*

*Based on Matthew 16:13-20*

Today's Gospel is about knowing the truth. It leaves us with a question about how that knowledge will affect us, and causes us to wonder what we are to do with that truth.

Let's set the story up with a little context: Jesus has just had an encounter with the Pharisees and the Sadducees—two groups that weren't necessarily on the best of terms with each other but who were working together to trap Jesus. You see, they wanted Jesus to perform a miracle so they could say he was the Messiah come to liberate Israel from Roman rule. But Jesus didn't give them what they asked for and warned the disciples about the 'yeast' of the Pharisees and Sadducees. A yeast of rumors and lies that warps the truth. Jesus was not going to be a warrior messiah, to battle over a nation-state; Jesus is the Messiah for the world, and his truth is much bigger than the Pharisees and Sadducees could have imagined.

With that as background, Jesus turns to the disciples in our lesson today and asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" He gets a list of prophets recent and ancient who have come again, but then he asks them who they say he is. And our dear Peter, the embodiment of putting your mouth in motion before your brain is in gear, lands squarely on the truth, "You are the Son of the Living God." Jesus reacts by saying he is blessed and because he knows this truth revealed by God, and on this rock of truth Jesus will build his church and even hell will not prevail against it. Jesus goes on to say that knowing this truth also conveys the keys to the kingdom of heaven and the power to bind and loose in heaven and on earth. I mean, this is kind of a big deal. It's exactly the type of thing that the Pharisees and Sadducees were looking for Jesus to say. If you are looking for proof of a warrior king, you've got it all—gates no one can penetrate and the ability to bind up anyone on earth or in heaven. Maybe that helps make sense of what Jesus says next to the disciples, when he sternly orders them not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

It is worth noting that from this point on, Jesus starts teaching the disciples what it really means to be the Messiah—the pain, the betrayal, and the ultimate sacrifice that is to come as he gives his life for the world. This truth they know becomes the lens through which they see the world. Things are different for them; they have been changed by knowing the truth.

With the story retold within the larger context, I think there is something here for us as well about the nature of truth in our times.

You see, we have seen the truth of what it is to gather in the name of Jesus the Christ, to eat and drink at the Eucharistic Feast, to share the peace with each other. We know that truth and celebrate it when we gather as Christians have done for over two millennia. But now we know another truth, that this gathering in his name, the way we have always done it creates a danger for us and for others that we must not ignore. You see, while we don't want to be subject to the limitations of physical distancing, we must now take the time apart and live with the truth we know in a new way. The truth doesn't change; we just hold it differently. More closely, more intimately.

Imagine how difficult it was for the disciples not to brag about getting the answer right—knowing the truth— and having to listen to Jesus teach while holding that truth close. It must have been difficult, but I imagine it also colored how they heard Jesus’ teachings, what they thought about when they heard some of the same sermons preached they had heard before. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Could it be that holding that truth tightly helped them understand the meekness and appreciate the inheritance to come?

In our time we also know that Jesus is the Son of the Living God: He is the Christ who has Died, the Christ who is Risen, and the Christ who will Come Again. And yet in this time of pandemic that truth feels different somehow— we hold it closely but we cannot gather to share it with each other. We have been set free by it, only to live in physical isolation without the ability to share it in the way we know best, by gathering around the table of God with each other.

So even as that truth remains the same, we are called to hold it in a different way. When we do come back together, what will we have learned from holding the truth of Christ during this season? Will it have changed our understanding of what it is to be the gathered people of God or will it just have been a season of quiet repose?

I believe that today’s lesson holds in it a challenge for us to not just press pause on our apprehension of what it is to know the truth that Jesus is the Son of the Living God, but to use this time to build up our knowledge and understanding of what it is to be a follower of Jesus in a new way.

So my friends, we know that Jesus is with us and the Holy Spirit of God enlivens the church even now in this pandemic. I ask you to use this time apart as an opportunity to hold the truth we know in a different way. Maybe it is to experience the gathering and worship of the church over the internet, maybe it is to start a daily prayer practice, to take time to read the scriptures, or maybe it is simply to call someone who also knows the truth and have a conversation about what it is to be a follower of Jesus in these days. This truth is more powerful than any pandemic, so hold it close and be ready to be changed by it in unexpected ways in these unexpected days.

May you be blessed by the truth you hold, know that nothing can prevail against it and may it bring you new understanding as we walk the Way of Love.

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