

Matthew 16:13-20 14th Sunday after Pentecost September 5, 1993

*13Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." 17And 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. 18And 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. 19I 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." 20Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.*

I remember trying to work with our sheep one evening. They were thirty in number. All were bunched together outside of our barn. My father, my brother, my sisters and I surrounded them. We closed in upon them slowly. They bunched together tightly. Then suddenly one darted between my sister and me, four others tried to follow. That's how sheep operate. One takes a chance, the rest blindly follow.

After a bit one took the chance we were hoping for all along. It entered the barn. All the rest very happily went right on in behind.

Sheep - sometimes that's what the Bible calls us. Today, when it comes to deciding right and wrong that's how we seem.

We follow the flock. As Christians we are not noticeably different from unbelievers in what we do. We attend the same movies, read the same books, are devoted to the same professional sports, drive the same cars, complain about the same problems, in many cases we do not even read our Bibles any more than those who do not have one. Like sheep we go with the crowd.

The crowd is our authority, our guide.

In days gone by, what pastor or priest or pope said shaped the lives of God's people.

Today while many might like me to bless the decisions they are making, they don't ask me to tell them what to do. If I want to keep you listening, I won't suggest anything too different from the crowd. For if I do, many will find a new church, or simply ignore my words.

The gospel for today is about authority. Immediately preceding the gospel Jesus warns the disciples to beware of the teaching of the scribes and the Pharisees. After Peter confesses Jesus

to be the Christ, Jesus gives Peter authority to bind and loose, the authority to teach what is right and wrong.

Early Christians were faced with a dilemma. On one hand they had all of the laws and teaching that began with Moses and had been interpreted and taught through the centuries as God's word.

On the other hand was Jesus' teaching.

The two were not the same. Jesus expanded and deepened the law.

He taught: "You have heard it said to the people of old, do not commit adultery. But I say to you everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

Or Jesus simply changed God's law. "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you if anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn the other also."

In other cases Jesus simply created new laws: "If anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well, and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."

Early Christians believed that Jesus was a higher authority than Moses, a higher authority than any of the prophets or teachers because he was the Messiah, the only Son of God.

But as we all are finding out, as life changes around us, yesterday's understanding of God's will is insufficient, or inappropriate.

For instance when I was young, a lot of time and energy was devoted to teaching how we were different from other Christians. Today the threat is not from Catholics or Presbyterians, but from Satanism, or New age Worship or aggressive atheism.

When I was young, not working on Sunday was a big issue. Today we do not even discuss that issue.

And nowhere is the change as large as it is in the area of sexuality. People living together outside of marriage, homosexuality, the language and behavior portrayed on TV or in movies all challenge us to new understandings.

Peter confessed, "You are the Messiah, the son of the living God."

Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. 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. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Peter and later all the disciples were given the authority to declare laws for God's people, and to unmake laws for God's people with the promise that whatever they declared would be ratified by God.

This was the rock upon which Jesus would build his church.

Like the rock he had talked of earlier as he said, "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house but it did not fall because it had been founded on rock.”

It is not good enough for us to just be sheep, then, in these days. We dare not follow the crowd. For the path is wide that leads to destruction.

We must begin with Jesus' words. Read them, hear them, know them. Obey them. Let Jesus words be an authority that is greater than our own desires and whims.

We must gather together under the Holy Spirit to seek what should be bound and what should be loosed in our day. For through Peter and the apostles this authority is given to the whole church.

Submitting to the authority of God over us is contrary to the spirit of the times in which we live. But this is the life to which we are called.

Living under God's authority is being herded into the barn. We struggle against that. We naturally don't like being pushed. Even though the barn is where we belong, God's will for us is for our good, we still rebel.

And when the sheep break loose, get away? Jesus taught of the shepherd who followed, searched, called to bring his straying lamb home. As Jesus did with Peter who would soon be denying Jesus three times, Jesus will come after you, after me, and lead us back once more.

For he loves us, and wants every good for us.