

“Who’s on first?”
Matthew 16:13-20

I remember our family vacation to England in 2001. My brother was living there at the time and we enjoyed many of the traditional tourist sites. A few years later I read an article about Trafalgar Square which intrigued and confused me at the same time.

It seems that every weekday morning, before tourists and schoolchildren descend on Trafalgar Square, city-authorized volunteers toss more than a hundred pounds of bird seed to a swarm of hungry pigeons. Then, four hours later, the city pays for a trained hawk to fly around the square and chase the pigeons away.ⁱ

I’m so confused. But then again, we live in a culture that’s confusing and confused and baffles the mind on a daily basis. Just take the world of medicine. Is anyone confused like me? It seem to me that one study is always debunking the findings of a previous study?

- Hormone replacement therapy is great. No. Hormone replacement therapy causes cancer.
- Saccharine causes cancer; Nutrasweet is good. No. Nutrasweet causes cancer and Saccharine is good.
- LowCarb/HighFat is the best diet. Whoops. Now we say NoFat/LowCarb is the best diet.
- Being slightly underweight is best. No. Being slightly overweight is best.

Whom should we believe? How do we determine the criteria that will allow us figure out who's on first? Remember that classic Abbot and Costello vaudeville routine "Who's On First?" It describes the feeling so many of us have as we try to figure out mortgage rates, credit card applications, phone bills, diet plans, schools for the kids, retirement strategies, and how to train the dog.

Who's on first? Abbot knows that Who's on first. What's on second. Where's on third. and "I don't know" plays shortstop. But Costello is completely confused, utterly flummoxed, and absolutely lost - baffled beyond belief. He has no idea what in the world is going on.

We live in a culture that’s confusing and confused and baffles the mind on a daily basis. But perhaps no more confusing than was the southern slope at the base of Mount Hermon in 30 CE.

There, in a sacred place, steeped in a tradition of divinely-guided insights and epiphanies, the disciples at last put their intuitions and inspirations into words. " . . . Who do you say that I am," Jesus directly asked his faithful followers.

Acting as spokesperson for the group, Peter volunteered to voice what the disciples had already grasp: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God".

In Matthew's text Jesus rewards Peter's confession with words of praise and blessing, and affirms that Peter's pronouncement was given to him by "my Father in heaven," by divine inspiration, and not by any human insight or analysis. Peter's words are so profoundly true that Jesus makes his confession the foundation, the rock, upon which his church will be built.

Now think how joyous Peter and all the disciples must have felt, how overwhelmed with wonder, washed over with awe, at finally knowing their Master's identity. The long-

awaited, eternally hoped-for Messiah had truly come. The Son of the living God stood right there in front of them!

As Jesus' most trusted companions, his chosen disciples, they had the honor of being the first to know this divinely-revealed truth. What great things must be just around the corner for Jesus and his followers!

And then, just as this great light of insight dawns most brightly on the disciples, **Jesus suddenly pulls the plug.** "Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ." (verse 20). Huh? Say What? Excuse Me?

Having had the greatest news ever possible revealed to them, the disciples are told to keep their mouths shut. They're NOT to shout it from the rooftops. They're NOT to have a parade through towns. They're NOT to let family, friends, officials in high places know the truth about Jesus.

Why in the world not?! What could Jesus be thinking? Now that they knew his identity, was it not their job as his disciples to announce the Messiah's coming to world? But no, Jesus said, you aren't to tell anyone. I'm so confused...

Just as Jesus had chosen the time and place to be recognized as Messiah, as Son of the living God by his disciples, he also knew how little the disciples truly understood about the nature of his messianic identity and mission.

The battle Jesus was preparing to fight wasn't against Caesar, or Herod, or even against Egypt or Assyria. The battle Jesus was preparing for was against sin, against the brokenness of the world and the shattered relationship between God and Creation.

And for the battle to be won, it would require suffering. It would require sacrifice. It would require faith and obedience - even unto death. Jesus' messianic mission was so different than that envisioned by his disciples that they had to keep quiet about him until they could be witnesses to his resurrection.

Surely the disciples felt dazed by the enormity of the revelation they had been given and confused by the order to keep silent about it.

But eventually, in God's own time, all became clear to Jesus' followers. They needed the resurrection in order to understand that the power of the cross had been broken. That the Messiah hadn't come to free Israel from the rule of Rome, but to free all creation from the grip of death.

It's hard to wait for God's own good time. We find events incomprehensible and can't understand the violations and violence that assault our sensibilities and break our hearts.

We're confounded and confused, enraged and revolted by the hatred and fear, death and destruction that surrounds our world like a thick, choking, filthy blanket of smog in places like Chicago or Portland or Seattle.

And through this haze of hatred people continue to confuse every aspect of their lives:

- We confuse "good" with "good at";
- We confuse downsizing with upgrading;
- We confuse advertisement with art;
- We confuse sex with love;
- We confuse "more" with better;
- We confuse "having" with happiness;
- We confuse stuff with success;

We confuse quiescence with contentment.

Regardless, we know the truth. We know he was crucified, dead and buried. We know that on the third day he arose again from the dead. We know Christ has risen, will come again, and will reign supreme. We know with Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

Through all our confusions, amidst all the discombobulations of every day, this one confession keeps us together - unafraid, un-swayed, undaunted in the face of this world's swirling contradictions and confusions. "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

ⁱ Wall Street Journal, 11 February 2005