Sunday, December 4, 1977
RIGHT WORDS, LITTLE MEANING
Matthew 16:13-17,21-23

Often in life we may know the right words, but not be aware of the full meaning of those words. We may say the right words, but not understand the implications of what we are saying. This was the experience of the disciple named Peter in the story just read from the Gospel of Matthew.

Notice first the setting of this little story. Jesus had been carrying on his ministry for some time, yet things had not been going very well. He had gained some followers, but also a lot of opposition. Thus, he and his disciples had left Galilee and had gone north to the village of Caesarea-Philippi. When they arrived there, Jesus asked his disciples, “What are people saying about me? What do you hear? Who do people think I am?”

The discip1es reported what they had been hearing. “Some seem to think you are John the Baptist. Others think you are the prophet Elijah returned from the Old Testament, and still others think you are the prophet Jeremiah, or perhaps one of the other prophets from the past.” They might well have added, “Some even think, you are the devil in disguise.” Then, as now, there was disagreement about the person called Jesus Christ.

Who is this Jesus? When we ask the question today, we too are often met with a variety of answers. To some Jesus is only a baby in a manger at Christmas time and they never get much beyond that. A baby in a manger doesn’t threaten or judge us very much. And everybody loves a baby.

To others, Jesus is a prophet and to others he is a great teacher. Still others claim that Jesus was an impractical idealist. To many he is a personal savior. It’s all a bit confusing at times. Why couldn’t God have arranged for a revelation that would have been more clearly identified? Even Jesus’own disciples misunderstood him1 and his mission. And if it was difficult for them, how much more so for us.

Yet there is more good news in this diversity of opinion than there is bad news. This Jesus cannot be contained in any one definition. We cannot put him in a box and say that we have all of him right here. No sooner have we. defined him to our satisfaction than someone else says, “Wait, you’ve forgotten something.”

We need not worry if our answers have different emphases. We should worry if all our answers are identical for that would mean that we had attempted to imprison the living Christ within one formula or definition. Whenever Jesus’followers have tried to do that, he has always found a way to break out of those limiting bonds.

But back to the story from the Gospel of Matthew. After Jesus got this variety of answers from his disciples concerning the question — “Who do people say that I am?” Then Jesus asked the disciples the same question — “Who do you say that I am?”

We can learn a lot from listening to the various answers which attempt to define Jesus Christ, but we also have to give our own answer.

Peter gave the first answer. He said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” These were the right words, but he didn’t know what they really meant. How do we know this? Because right after this conversation, Jesus began to tell his disciples what was going to happen to him in the near future. He would suffer many things and finally be crucified. It was the same disciple who a bit earlier had said the right words who now said to Jesus — “This can’t happen to you. Don’t let it be that way.” Peter was in effect saying, “The Living Christ, the Son of God, which I want to follow will not have that happen to him.” Peter knew the right words but didn’t know what they meant.

This was not the only time in Jesus’ministry when someone knew the right words but did not understand the meaning or the implication of the words.

Early in Jesus’ministry, he had gone back to his hometown of Nazareth, and on the Sabbath, he was chosen to read the Old Testament lesson in the worship service. The scripture for that day was a passage from the prophet Isaiah, these words:

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to those who are bound....”

These were familiar words to all who heard them. Most of those present knew them from memory. Jesus, however, not only read the words, but he pointed out some of the meaning and implications of those familiar words. Then those present got very upset. They chased him out of the Synagogue and tried to throw him over a cliff.

We too, often say and know the right words, but are not aware of their full meaning or their implications.

I recall a visit I had some time ago with a young man who had been “born again” at an evangelistic rally of some sort or another. The emotional excitement had died down by the time of our meeting and he was back where he began or perhaps further back. The warm and wonderful glow had faded, and he was now not only distressed by his original condition but also by the fact that he had fa11en down on his conversion, broken his vows, lost his Christ.

The more we talked, the more I realized that when he was “born again,” at that moment he was told the right words and he said the right words, made the commitment but really didn’t know the meaning of the words he had said. or their implications. He had accepted Christ as his Savior but really didn’t know what that meant except in a very narrow way.

After his conversion, he had not become a part of a Christian community where he could be helped to learn and live the full implications of what he had promised. He would’ve also have learned that spiritual dry spells come to all of us and that no one can maintain or maybe even recapture the emotional peak he had experienced at the evangelistic rally.

He needed to learn that just being born, whether it is being physically born or spiritually reborn is only the first step, the beginning. Saying the right words is just the beginning, the more difficult part comes in following through in continuing to grow and mature. Knowing or saying the right words is never enough in itself.

This knowing or saying the right words, but not being fully aware of their meaning or implication is part of 4. every aspect of our living. We say the right words when we take the

marriage vows·. “I promise to love and sustain you in the bonds of marriage from this day forward, in joy and in sorrow, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, till death shall part us, according to God’s holy ordinance.”

But who among us at the time we say those words can see into the future and know the full meaning and the implications of what we are saying? “In sickness and in health.” We usually assume that it will be mostly health. But what will we do if our spouse is sick for years and years?

One couple said to me not long ago, “When we got married some 30 years ago and promised to love and sustain each other for better or for worse, we had no idea there would be so much worse.”

None of us can ever know the full meaning of the right words when we first say them. And that’s all right if we recognize this fact and then continue to be open and sensitive to new meanings of the words, the full implications so that we can grow and mature in them.

The first or second or third time that most of us said the words, “I love you” to someone, we no doubt used the right words to express our feelings at that moment and that’s why we used the words. But we also didn’t know fully what the word “Love” meant and its incredible implications.

Yet how easy it is to say the right words sometimes, how easy it is to take vows, and then later we are surprised when we begin to become aware of the full meaning and consequences of those words and vows.

We all take very serious vows when we have our children baptized. We say the right words. We promise with God’s help and by our life and teaching to lead our children into the Christian life. We also promise to guide and instruct them that they may be led to the confession of Christ as Lord and. Savior and into responsible membership in Christ’s church. The words are easy to say “yes” to but much more difficult to carry out.

Sometimes also like the people in Jesus’hometown synagogue, we become so familiar with some words and phrases that they lose their impact on us. This is particularly true of many of the words and phrases and stories that are related to the Advent and Christmas season. This is also especially true of many of the words in the familiar Christmas carols.

One of the songs in the Bible in the Gospel of Luke which is part of the advent story is that poem of Mary’s as she looks forward to the birth of her child and what impact his ministry, death and resurrection will have on the world. Listen carefully to the words! this song is usually called the “Magnificat.”

“He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts; he has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of low degree. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.”

Mary’s words are consistent with the record of what God has done and with what God continues to do through the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. These words make Christmas and what follows something more than just a sentimental journey.

So, in these coming weeks, as we remember the baby Jesus, we will also be remembering that he did not remain a baby. It's easy to say the right words when we worship only at the manger, but it's difficult to follow Christ to the cross.

During this Christmas season, all of us are going to say many of the right words as we have in seasons past. We're going to say and hear many of the familiar words that we've said and heard over and over again. Hopefully, like the disciple Peter, we will also continue to grow and be open to new meanings in those words. To say with Peter, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God, is never the end of the matter, but only the beginning of an ongoing examination of what those words mean in our lives." Amen.