

Pentecost 11, Proper 16
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

August 24, 2014
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Binding and Loosing

20 centuries ago there was a couple in the Middle East whose surname was "Christ." They had a son and were discussing what to name the little boy. Being from the Middle East they thought of Middle Eastern names like: Abdul—no, that's not right. How about Moses? No, too presumptuous. Hillel—nobody will remember whether that has 2 "I's" or 3. Try Nebuchadnezzar—and Mom said, "I don't think so!" "I know, I know," cried the father. "Let's name him something really modern. Let's go with that latest version of the great leader of Israel, Joshua. Let's call him "Jesus!" It turned out that this boy grew up to be very famous. He is known to this day. Everyone still talks about "Jesus Christ!"

No, that's not exactly how it went, was it? If Jesus had a last name it certainly wasn't Christ. Following the Jewish custom he would have been Yeshua Bar-Yosef. But in spite of popular opinion, "Christ" is not a surname, it is a title. We could properly say, "Jesus, the Christ." like, "Alexander, the Great," or "Ivan, the Red." It was a title that described something essential about him.

Now in today's Gospel lesson Peter makes a stunning declaration about who Jesus is in the face of all the mealy-mouthed mutterings of the crowd. He says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." There are two parts to this declaration.

Let's take the last one first—you'll see why shortly. "Son of the Living God." Alexander the Great and many of the Caesars of ancient Rome were called sons of God. Most every great leader got the moniker. In the Greek pantheon some of these were demigods, kind of hybrids, half god and half human, with half the power of the gods and all the fallibility of humans! "Son of the living God," when you look back into the Old Testament, is nothing special either. Angels appear as sons of God in the fiery furnace with Shadrak, Mishak and Abednego. High and mighty leaders like David were often referred to as sons of God. There seem to have been sons of God running around most anywhere, too! Now, from the vantage point of our place in history we can see another meaning in Peter's words. Son of God as second person of the Trinity made flesh, the bridging of the gulf between the Creator and the Creation, with all the meaning and power of the Incarnation involved.

But it's not really fair to attribute to him something that only got officially formulated at the Council of Nicaea, in 325. Peter and the rest of the disciples this really didn't have the meaning for them that it has come to have for us after 2000 years of Christian

reflection on the nature of Jesus, the Christ. What Peter declared here was that he thought Jesus was a really special guy, and I think that's nice. I happen to agree.

“The Christ,” Here, however, has a whole lot more meat on the bones. "Christ" is a Greek version of "Meshiah," and "Meshiah," meant God's anointed one, one chosen by God for a special work. Kings of Israel were anointed by prophets in this way. Prophets were anointed for this purpose. True, there were a lot of "Meshiah's" in the Old Testament, but by the time you get to Peter's day it had come to mean pretty much only one thing—the one anointed by God to bring back the golden age of Israel.

It is important to note that being anointed is something done to you. One does not seek it out, or anoint oneself. So when Peter makes this declaration he is claiming that Jesus has surrendered to the special call of God. He is saying more than using a fancy title for his Rabbi, he is saying something profound about what the nature of that Rabbi is. This Rabbi has come to show us the way of Surrender to the Call of God. It is not long after this declaration that Jesus goes to the Cross. Here we see the ultimate surrender of Jesus, the Anointed One. This is the heart and soul, the very core of the special work to which Jesus had been called, to open for us the way of death and resurrection. This is the great act of surrender on which Jesus will build the church. For the way of Jesus calls us to walk the way of the Cross as well, to die to the rule of our ego, and to live to the Spirit of God within our spirit, and to learn to live in love.

This is the essence of the Church: A group of people wrestling with what it means to die, so that we might live again, just like our Rabbi, Yeshua Meshiah, has shown us. And this is truly surrender. It is only by His Spirit that we can do so. It is not something achieved or accomplished, it is a letting go, a releasing of our willfulness, that we might be raised by Christ's resurrection to a willingness to do the work for which we are anointed.

The most astounding thing is, the gates of Hades have not prevailed against it, and they never will. The gates of Hades are driven by the rule of the ego, our pride that would put us in the middle of the Universe, and bend it to our will. Hell in all its fury is totally undercut and ruined when someone comes along and works from a place of love rather than pride. Hell has no defense against love. It has no power over surrender.

This brings us to Jesus' most surprising of commands: We bind and loose. There is in the Pacific Islands a persistent cult among indigenous peoples there that dates to the days of the Pacific Theater of WWII. It's called the Cargo Cult. Indigenous people saw American soldiers land on their islands. Following them came ship-loads (literally) of cargo, food, clothing, jeeps, guns, money, riches of all kinds. The locals figured that the white man had the secret to calling the cargo from across the waters, and they set out to

figure it out. They copied everything they saw the American soldiers doing. They made makeshift uniforms, they marched in a line, and they learned some English. But it just didn't work. To this day you can see the remnants of the Cargo Cult, sorry, ragtag efforts at controlling the universe, and bringing the Cargo from across the waters.

The problem with the Cargo Cult is that it is cut off from the real source of the Cargo. The men who seek it are not American soldiers, and they are not engaged in a World War. They do not have the strength of a robust 1940's American economy behind the ships. They bound and loosed to no avail.

This verse has been used like a Cargo Cult in the past. "God gave us the power to bind and loose, so you're bound in your sins until you do what I say." I'm sorry, that's egotism. It's not surrender and it's wrong. There is a variation on it: "Get two or three together and we will agree and it will come to pass." I'm sorry, that's not miracle, that's magic, and it's wrong. This verse does NOT put God at our disposal. It calls us to radical surrender.

We bind and loose in two senses. Internally to our own spirits we bind and loose. We bind ourselves to the love of God, and we loose ourselves from the control of the ego. We die to our sin and pride, and we surrender to the resurrection of Christ. Every time we say No to our ego's desire to be in the center of the world, we bind our sin to the Cross, and we loose our spirits to love.

We do so in community as well. Every time we stand up for what is true to the love of God we bind and loose. We bind the world to God's heart, and we loose the love of God in the world. Every time we choose to act in love rather than selfishness we bind and loose. We bind ourselves to one another, and we loose our alienation and hurt to drift away. Every time we honor one another as creations made in the image of God we bind and loose. We bind our eyes to the eyes of God, and we loose them to become who they really are. Every time we love deeply enough to be connected and not lose ourselves in the process we bind ourselves to others and we loose us both to live in love.

And these things have heavenly consequences. If heaven is all around us as well as beyond us, then when we seek to bind the sinful brokenness of the world and loose the love God Heaven comes near to us. If one soul is drawn into a conscious relationship with God through our words and deeds they have been bound to God's heart and loosed from the fires of hell, and we have been true to Christ's command.