

we had to look at lots of demographic data for our county. What percent of the people of Nicollet County do you think are members of a church—any church? Just 54%! There are 15,000 people in our county who don't really know who Jesus is.

That's a lot! What should we do? In the early 1900s, two shoe companies decided to expand their business to Africa. Each company sent a sales rep there to scout the possibilities. The first sales rep landed in Africa and began walking around. After a matter of minutes, he ran to the telegraph office: "Stop production. Nobody here wears shoes!" Around the same time, the sales rep from the other company landed and walked around the same village. After a short time, he too ran to the telegraph office: "Build more factories. Send as many shoes as you can. Nobody here wears shoes!" So a lot of people don't know Jesus? What an awesome opportunity God's given us and our congregation!

It's just that there's one more thing that gets in the way—fear. "Pastor, I'm scared. This isn't as easy for me as it is for you." You know what? I get scared too. While I was studying to be a pastor at Martin Luther College, people would ask me if I was looking forward to being a pastor. I would tell them that I was, as long as I didn't have to do outreach. When I was at the Seminary, we took a personality test to see whether we were introverts or an extroverts. How do you think I did? I was 90-10—an introvert. So I get scared too. But it's not about me. It's not about you. It's about Jesus, and all those people who need to know the answer to the most important question. That's our purpose.

And every time the thought comes into your head, "I'm scared," I want you to remember that your life is built on the Rock. Now, there's another person today who's known as the "Rock"—Dwayne Johnson. I want you to imagine that you're friends with the "Rock," and that he went with you wherever you went. How would that feel? Awkward. But once you got over the awkward part, how would you feel? Safe. At peace. You'd probably get used to going around saying, "Yeah, I'm friends with the Rock!" That's what you've got—the Rock. Jesus holds you up at every moment of every day. You get to say to others, "Yeah, I'm friends with the Rock."

And that will fill you with the confidence that God wants his people to have. Oh, it's easy for us to feel defeated. You watch the pomp of the pope. You see "Ianity"—this Christless nature of our society. A different pastor here in Saint Peter once said at a meeting, "What's going to happen in fifteen years when there aren't any churches anymore?" We better not go through life like that! How could we go through life defeated? The gates of hell itself cannot overcome the Church of Christ. Because you know who Jesus is. You believe in the Christ, the Son of the living God. God can't lose. Who Jesus is gives you peace. Who Jesus is gives us purpose. Amen!

Matthew 16:13-20
Rev. Nathan Nass

Mission Festival
September 27, 2015

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." ²⁰ Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

Who Is Jesus?

It's amazing how much attention one man can generate. The pope is here! It's been almost impossible to live in the United States this week without hearing—everywhere—about the pope. Huge crowds. Speeches to Congress. Non-stop coverage of the cars he's chosen to ride in. It's amazing how much attention one man can generate! Why are people so excited? Well, Pope Francis has been willing to talk about real issues that people care about. He's talked about homosexuality and inequality and climate control and abortion and immigration. Real issues. People are intrigued. There's just one thing I haven't heard the pope talk much about: Jesus!

That makes me think of a speech I watched this past summer. There was a huge funeral for Pastor Clem Pinckney, one of the victims of the Charleston church shooting. A famous man gave a very powerful eulogy about grace. That preacher said some good things: "Grace is not earned. Grace is not merited. It's not something we deserve. Rather, grace is the free and benevolent favor of God." Do you know who that famous preacher was? It was President Obama—who, of course, is a Christian, not a Muslim. As he eulogized that pastor, President Obama preached a sermon for 37 minutes about grace. There's just one word that he never mentioned in 37 minutes: Jesus!

This is what's happening in America. It's not that people are no longer spiritual. People are still thinking spiritually, because God made us spiritual beings. They use the same words—grace, faith, forgiveness. It's just that Christ is being taken out of Christianity. We read earlier what Jesus thought about himself: "*I am the way and the truth and the life.*" That's still what people want today—a way, truth, life. They just want all that without needing Jesus. Except, do you know what Christianity is when Christ is taken out? "Ianity."

Do you know what that means? Me neither. People are confused. I'd like to ask the pope, or President Obama, "Who is Jesus?"

This is nothing new. In Jesus' day, the biggest question facing the people was, "Who is Jesus?" The last thing Jesus wants is confusion about who he is. So Jesus asked his disciples, "*Who do people say the Son of Man is?*" Just like today, everyone had a different opinion. Some said Jesus was John the Baptist, who, according to Jesus, was the greatest prophet who ever lived. Some said he was Elijah—the prophet who was taken to heaven in a chariot of fire. Some said he was Jeremiah, the prophet who wrote the longest book in the Bible. These men weren't slouches! The people had a high opinion of Jesus. They compared him to the greatest men ever. Just like people today compare Jesus with the Dalai Lama, with Buddha, with Muhammad, with the Pope.

But you could tell that Jesus still wasn't satisfied. Those names—Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist—sound flattering, but they weren't good enough for Jesus. He's more! So he pressed his disciples further. "*But what about you? Who do you say I am?*" At the end of the day, that's the most important question for you to answer. Who do you say Jesus is? Because one day you are going to stand before God. And you—not your pastor, not your spouse, not your mom—will be judged on your relationship with Jesus.

So what would you have said to Jesus? I'd like to think that a great answer would have jumped out of my mouth. "You're my Savior! You're God!" Except, we don't live in a vacuum. It's not just "the world" that sometimes takes Christ out of Christianity. You do. I do. You do it whenever you rely on yourself instead of on Jesus. You do it when you talk about Jesus at church and nowhere else. You do it when you feel you've been good enough to keep God happy—or make it into heaven. Isn't that taking Jesus out of Christianity? You do it every time you look for peace outside of God and his Word. You do it when you listen to Jesus' Word, but you refuse to do what it says. You do it when you fit Jesus into your schedule, when it's convenient for you. Making Jesus less in your life will never result in good things. Amidst all the confusion, you need to know, "Who is Jesus?"

Peter got it right. His opinion about Jesus wasn't based on what everyone else was saying, it was based on what he knew about Jesus from God's Word. "*Who do you say I am?*" "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" What a cool moment! God had convinced Peter of the truth. Jesus was more than what anyone else was saying about him. He isn't just a prophet. He's the "Christ," the Savior of the world. He isn't just a good man. He's the "Son of the living God!" Few people have anything bad to say about Jesus, but few people go far enough. Peter believed that Jesus was the Savior. His Savior. There was and would be no other Jesus.

So I'm jealous. Not of Peter—of a church's name. I get little jealous when I ask peo-

ple around town where they go to church, and people say, "the Jesus Church." What a great way for your church to be known! But when they chose their name, they didn't just choose "Jesus". What does their billboard say? "Jesus." As in, "Jesus is everything." As in, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*" "Jesus." I've heard they've received complaints about their name. "It's too exclusive!" But that's who Jesus is! That was Peter's confession. "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!*" Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords. The one and only way to heaven. Jesus.

Friends, who you believe Jesus to be really matters! Because when you believe that Jesus really is your Savior, look at what you have. "*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.*" You are looking for someone you can really count on in life. Something you can really depend on. You have it! Your life is built on the Rock of Jesus Christ. Not even Satan and the gates of hell can overcome you and your God. In your hand and heart are the keys to heaven itself. Knowing who Jesus is gives you peace.

And knowing who Jesus is gives our congregation its purpose. If we have the keys to the kingdom of heaven, what should we do? It's interesting what Jesus tells his disciples to do. He warned them not to tell anyone he was the Christ! But that's because it wasn't time to get his enemies all riled up yet. Once Jesus died and rose again, the situation changed. As he left the earth, do you remember what he told his church to do? "*Go and make disciples of all nations.*" It makes perfect sense, right? We want others to have what we have! If faith in Jesus is the only way to heaven, we want people to have faith. Knowing who Jesus is gives purpose to our congregation. It's simple: We exist to help people in a confused world know who Jesus really is.

"Great, Pastor! That's why we've got an outreach committee. That's why you're here!" I hope that's not what you're thinking. Where does that idea come from? It's hard to think of a more damaging attitude in a church than that it's someone else's job to share Jesus. This is simply not true, and the devil loves to use that excuse to keep people out of heaven. You want to know the honest truth? Out of all of our outreach events over the last two years, not one new family has joined our church. Because programs don't connect people with a church. People do! Churches don't grow by events. They grow by relationships. The best way for people to fall in love with Jesus is to get to know you.

But that's where excuse #2 comes in: "But Pastor, everyone in Saint Peter already has a church." A new Missouri Synod Lutheran church started here in Saint Peter two years ago. Before opening a mission, they did an extensive study and realized that over 3,000 people in Saint Peter don't have a church. It was such a ripe mission field that they planted a new church here! Maybe they messed up. Well, as part of our congregation's self-study,