

## **Knowing Michael Phelps *and* the Messiah**

*August 24, 2008*

(Pentecost 15 - Year A)

Matthew 16: 13-20

*St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas*

Today's sermon is going to begin with a little congregational participation.

I want everyone here to raise their hand if they know who Michael Phelps is.

*{raise hands}*

Of course, Michael Phelps is the most successful Olympic athlete of all time, winning 8 gold medals in the Beijing Olympics.

Yet, I would venture to say that most of us in this congregation today know who Michael Phelps is, not because we read a book about him and not because someone else told us about him.

I would venture to say that most of us know that Michael Phelps is a swimmer and the most successful Olympic athlete of all time...because we have experienced his achievements.

We stayed up and watched TV, each and every night, counting the gold medals as Phelps achieved each one.

We experienced the joy of his mother and his sisters, who supported him so devotedly in the stands.

We experienced, in amazement, Phelps' unbelievable physical prowess in winning the 100 meter butterfly by just 1/100<sup>th</sup> of a second.

We know who Michael Phelps is, not because we learned about him or read about him in books.

Instead, we know who Michael Phelps is because we joined in the experience of his amazing athletic achievements.

As I began this sermon, I asked for a show of hands of those who know who Michael Phelps is.

However, I will not embarrass you by asking for a show of hands of those who know who Jesus is.

However, the question of who Jesus is is the question put before us today in the Gospel reading from Matthew.

Jesus asks his followers:

“Who do people say that I am?”

And the disciples answer with a variety of responses ranging from Elijah or John the Baptist or one of the other prophets come back from the dead.

Then Jesus asks the question again, more personally, by asking:

“But who do *you* say that I am?”

And Simon Peter answers back:

“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus seems very pleased that Simon Peter gives the right answer and Jesus replies:

“Blessed are you, Simon!

For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.”

Or, if we read that same verse in the paraphrase version of the Bible called *The Message*, Jesus replies to Simon Peter:

“God bless you, Simon!

For you did not get that answer out of books or from teachers.”

Instead, Simon Peter knew that Jesus was the Messiah because Peter had hands-on experience that Jesus is the anointed one, who is Love.

We know who Michael Phelps is, that he is the greatest Olympian of all time, because we have experienced his uniqueness.

And we know who Jesus is, that he is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, because we have experienced *his* uniqueness.

When I was a seminary student in Virginia, my faculty advisor during my first year of studies was Dr. Tony Lewis.

Dr. Lewis - or Tony, as we called him - is a rotund New Testament professor, who closely resembles Al Roker, the TV weatherman on the Today Show.

At the end of our first academic year in seminary, we were required to have an evaluation conference with our faculty advisor, to review the progress of our theological studies.

Tony, my faculty advisor, asked his students to come to this evaluation conference with a copy of our academic grades, with some samples of our theological papers and with a one page paper listing our strengths and weaknesses as students.

I arrived at the conference with a well-organized manila folder with all the required documents included.

I sat down in Dr. Tony Lewis' office, a little nervously.

Then, Tony looked me in the eye and said:

“I have only one question that I ask all of my students at the end of their first academic year at the Virginia Theological Seminary.

And that question is this:

Jeff - is Jesus the Messiah, the Son of the living God?”

At first, I was surprised that Tony did not want to discuss my grades or the papers I had brought.

But then, like Simon Peter, I replied back:

“Yes.

Jesus *is* the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

However, my answer had nothing at all to do with the theological lectures I had heard, nor with the mountains of books that I had been required to read.

I did not get my answer out of books or from professors.

Instead, my experience of living with other people within the context of a Christian community has revealed the uniqueness of Jesus to me.

For I know that Jesus is the Messiah, the unique Son of God, because I know Frank Blossman,

Frank Blossman is an old man from the church where I grew up, who stood at the church door every Sunday morning and shook hands and welcomed every person into worship, even though his hands were gnarled with painful arthritis.

I know that Jesus is the Messiah, the unique Son of God, because I know  
Jody Eliot,

Jody Eliot is a woman from our former church in Houston who lived on  
a fixed income, yet who sent our family \$10 a month while we  
were in seminary, to help us live on my wife's teacher's salary.

I know that Jesus is the Messiah, the unique Son of God, because I have  
spent my whole life worshiping in Jesus' Church,  
Where I sit and kneel next to people who are so different from me that I  
know that it is only God's Messiah who can bring us together.

I know that Jesus is the unique Son of God, not because books or  
teachers have revealed this to me.

I know that Jesus is the Messiah, the unique Son of God, because I have  
met him, I have experienced him and his love, in the faces and in  
the lives of each of you.

Many people want to experience God and to be able to say - with some  
degree of boldness - that they know who Jesus is, that they know  
that Jesus is the Son of God.

My answer to you - and to everyone - is that you *will* experience who  
Jesus is, by regularly experiencing him in his church.

Now, I know that we can meet Jesus anywhere, especially outside these  
walls.

However, I also know that Jesus regularly shows up at St. Alban's  
Episcopal Church each Sunday.

I know that if you bring your children or your grandchildren or your  
young friends to our Godly Play Sunday School, each and every  
Sunday, then those children will experience Jesus and meet him  
there.

I know that if you join a Bible Study Fellowship Group, then you will  
experience Jesus there in the circle of other people who are also  
experiencing that God is revealed when people open up the Bible  
and explore it together.

I know that if the parents and godparents of Anna and Brown Hicks,  
whom we baptize today, will seriously live into the promises that

they make today, then both Anna and Brown will experience Jesus as the Messiah, the son of the living God.

You don't need to raise your hand to answer this question, but:  
Who do *you* say that Jesus is?

For he is the Messiah, the Son of the living God,  
Revealed to us each and every day,  
In the faces and lives of you...and you...and you.

AMEN.

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