

Putting Christ back in Christianity

By [Evan D. Garner](#)

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“That preacher is the next Billy Graham!” an excited worshipper said after hearing a young clergyperson deliver a powerful, heart-wrenching sermon.

“He’s a prophet—a new Martin Luther King!” a member of the crowd exclaimed after listening to the brilliant oratory of a rising star who called for justice.

“The future of the party rests on his shoulders—the next John Kennedy!” a pundit declared, summing up the attitude of the whole political convention.

Comparisons to great historical figures are dangerous. They might contain a thread of truth, but, in time, they usually disappoint us. Maybe the next John F. Kennedy is out there somewhere, but I doubt any of us know who she or he is. Perhaps the next election cycle will send important, selfless, visionary people into office, but we cannot expect a cookie-cutter replica of someone from the past. We might dream of it being true, and we might even stretch comparisons too far, but they almost never work because life doesn’t work that way.

In Sunday’s gospel lesson ([Matthew 16:13-20](#)), Jesus, using a self-referential title popular in Matthew’s gospel account, asks his disciples who the "Son of Man" is. The answers include John the Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah. In other words, people can tell that Jesus is someone special, but they haven’t quite pinned him down yet. Like a team’s new quarterback, Jesus’s style of play is being compared with that of the hall-of-fame talents who have gone before. He’s a little like this and little like that. But, whoever he is, they can tell that he’s a great figure worthy of the most reverential comparisons. We’re not talking second tier, here. This is as good as it gets.

Still, though, something is missing. Jesus is different from all of them. How so? “But who do you say that I am?” Jesus asks.

Simon Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” That’s a risky thing to say—far riskier than comparing Jesus with one of the greatest prophets of the Jewish tradition. To call someone “the messiah” is to elevate the talk to a whole new level. There is no room for disappointment anymore. Either you’re the messiah, or you’re not. There’s a difference between being great and being God’s anointed one. Ontological categories that only have room for one make for bold and dangerous identifications. What will this mean, to call Jesus the messiah?

Jesus lets us know that Peter is right—that God the Father himself has revealed that truth to him. It’s a break-through moment that has its own observance on the liturgical calendar (The Feast of the Confession of St. Peter on January 18). It means that with Jesus, no comparison is accurate. He’s not like any other. He’s unique. This is a fundamental principle of Christianity. Jesus is the God-Man, the incarnate one. He’s not just a prophet with a wonderful message. Despite what our 21st-century sensibilities might want us to say, he’s not just another way up the mountain of psycho-social fulfillment. He’s different. We can’t dismiss the uniqueness of Jesus as an accident of history—an anachronistic doctrine worth revisiting. Without Jesus being like no other, our faith falls apart, and we might as well turn all of our churches into art galleries and concert halls.

After Peter’s amazing statement, Jesus says something remarkable: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Forgiveness of sin is something that belongs to God alone. Jesus gets in trouble for this right from the start of his ministry. (For example, read [Matthew 9:1-8](#), where Jesus proclaims the forgiveness of a paralytic before offering him physical healing.) Jesus shows the world that he has the authority to forgive sins—authority given to him (note “Son of Man” in Matt. 9:6) by his father. Jesus then gives that authority to his apostles. That isn’t possible unless Jesus is who he says he is. And, if we have any hope of being reconciled to God, we need that authority to be real.

This Sunday is a chance to explore the uniqueness of Jesus. Thus, it’s a chance to ask, “Why are we Christians, anyway?” More and more, it seems the instinctive answer has something to do with “being good” or “doing good things for other people.” But, if that’s the case, we aren’t Christians; we’re just secular humanists who like a midmorning snack of bread and wine. Let’s get back in touch with the particularity of Christ. He is more than a teacher, more than a prophet, more than a spiritual guru. He is the one who has the authority to reconcile us to God and to give

that power of reconciliation to those who carry out his ministry in his name. We're still months away from Christmas, but let's not wait to put the Christ back in Christianity.

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