

Who Do You Say You Are?

Matthew 16:13–20 — School Bag Blessing Sunday

There is something special about the beginning of a school year.

New classrooms. New teachers. New schedules. New backpacks.

And maybe a few butterflies in your stomach.

For some of you, the beginning of a new school year is exciting. You can't wait to see your friends. Maybe you're excited about your new teacher, sports, art, music, or just getting back into a routine.

For others, there may be a little nervousness.

Will I make friends?

Will I like my teacher?

Will I be good enough?

What if I don't understand something?

What if I don't fit in?

And those feelings are real.

But there is something I want you to remember as you begin this school year.

Our Gospel today begins with a question from Jesus.

Jesus asks his disciples:

“Who do people say that I am?”

And they give him several answers.

Then Jesus makes the question personal:

“But who do you say that I am?”

Peter answers:

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

And then Jesus says something remarkable to Peter:

“You are Peter.”

Jesus doesn't only tell Peter who *Jesus* is.

Jesus reminds Peter who *Peter* is.

And children, I want you to hear that today.

Because when you go to school, you will hear a lot of things about yourself.

Someone may tell you that you're smart.

Someone else may tell you that you're not good at something.

Someone may tell you that you're funny.

Someone may tell you that you're weird.

You might get an A on a test.

You might get a grade that disappoints you.

You might make the team.

You might not make the team.

You might have lots of friends.

You might have a day when you feel completely alone.

But none of those things tells you who you really are.

Your grades don't tell you who you are.

Your popularity doesn't tell you who you are.

Your athletic ability doesn't tell you who you are.

And even your mistakes don't tell you who you are.

God tells you who you are.

And God says:

You are my beloved child.

You are loved.

You are important.

You belong.

And nothing you accomplish at school can make God love you more.

And nothing you do can make God love you less.

You don't have to earn God's love.

You already have it.

So when school gets hard — and there probably will be a few hard days — remember this:

You are God's child.

And you are not alone.

Because look around this room.

These are your people.

This is your church family.

And that brings me to the adults in this room.

Because today isn't only about what we want to say to our children.

It is also about what **we**, as a congregation, are promising to do for them.

We are not simply a congregation that happens to have children in it.

We are their church.

And that means we have a responsibility.

Our children are growing up in a complicated world.

They will encounter pressure.

They will experience disappointment.

They will sometimes question themselves.

They will sometimes wonder whether they are good enough.

And there will be moments when they need someone to remind them of something they have forgotten:

You are loved.

You belong.

You are God's child.

That is part of our calling as a church.

So, congregation, I want you to look at these children.

Look at them — not simply as the children who happen to attend our church, but as children who have been entrusted to us.

They are part of our church family.

And we have a role in helping them grow in faith.

We promise to pray for them.

We promise to encourage them.

We promise to listen to them.

We promise to celebrate their joys.

And when life is difficult, we promise not to turn away.

We may not be able to protect them from every difficult thing that will happen this school year.

We can't promise that they will never be bullied.

We can't promise that they will never fail.

We can't promise that every friendship will last.

We can't promise that every day will be a good day.

But we can promise that **they don't have to walk through those days alone.**

Because they have a church family.

And church family means that we carry one another.

Sometimes our children will need us to carry them.

And sometimes, perhaps without even realizing it, they will carry us.

That's what the body of Christ does.

We belong to one another.

So when our children walk into their classrooms this year, we may not be there physically.

But we can be there in prayer.

When they sit on the school bus, we can be praying.

When they face a difficult test, we can be praying.

When they make a new friend, we can celebrate.

When they come home hurting, we can listen.

And when they forget who they are, we can remind them.

You are loved.

You belong.

You are God's beloved child.

And now, children, I want to come back to you for just a moment.

In a few minutes, we are going to bless your school bags.

But really, we are blessing **you**.

Your backpack will carry your books.

It will carry your pencils.

It will carry your homework.

It may even feel very heavy sometimes.

But you don't have to carry this school year all by yourself.

God goes with you.

And your church goes with you.

So when you put that backpack on tomorrow morning,
remember:

You are not alone.

When school is exciting — God is with you.

When school is difficult — God is with you.

When you feel confident — God is with you.

When you feel afraid — God is with you.

And when you wonder who you are, remember the words Jesus
spoke to Peter:

“You are...”

You are loved.

You are God's child.

You belong.

And we are going to walk with you.

So today, we bless these school bags.

And we bless the children who carry them.

And as a congregation, we make a promise:

We will carry you through this school year.

Not because we know exactly what this year will bring.

We don't.

But because we know who goes with us.

Christ is with us.

And we are with one another.

Amen.