

Sermon for 8-23-20

When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. 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." Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. Matthew 16:13-20

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God-- what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Romans 12:1-8

If you ask small children to tell you something about church they might not say anything about learning Bible stories or that Jesus is the Son of God. It's more likely that they will tell you about how church makes them feel, how they love snack time, or that they get to make things with play doh or glitter or pipe cleaners that they can bring home. And they will tell you about the grownups who listen to them and make them laugh, and about the games they play with their friends. Because for children, faith is an experiential thing, an experience of love, joy, and delight. As adults, sometimes we forget that, getting all up in our heads about our faith, rather than experiencing it with our bodies, and with our senses.

In Paul's letter, he appeals to the Christians in Rome to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is their spiritual worship. The first Christians were oppressed by the politics of Rome, a powerful authority not at all interested in anyone's verbal confession of faith. These early Christians knew they would have to put their faith, their confession, into action. Bodies are important and necessary, says Paul. Every one of us is important because we have each been given gifts that, if we will use them, will make the Church alive and visible in the world.

And in our Gospel reading, Jesus asks what may be one of the most important questions in all of scripture. I imagine you could have heard a pin drop as the disciples thought about how on earth they would answer the question. "But who do you say that I am?" I suspect that if Jesus walked into Christ and Grace and asked us this same question, we would be just as stunned.

I mean, how do you answer a question like that? Perhaps we would begin by telling stories we know of what Jesus did. Stories like feeding the hungry multitudes, walking on water, healing the sick, teaching about the kingdom. Then we might move into sharing some of the experiences we have had of ways Jesus has been present to us. Finally, we might show others by our actions the ways our lives have been changed, as we work to change the lives of others. In this way we are returning to our childlike faith to show how confessions of faith are best made – by our actions, which are modeled on the actions of Jesus.

And so we might ask ourselves, what do our lives say about who Jesus is? How do our words and actions share our experience of the risen Christ in our own lives? What are we saying in our relationships with others, or with our bank accounts, our time, our energy, and all the rest? Who do we really say Jesus is?

Jesus asks us, “Who do you say that I am?” Every one of us has to answer this question, because who we say that Jesus is has everything to do with who we are willing to be. Do we know who we are? Who we want to be? Reflecting on these important questions is really difficult in the midst of everything going on around us - politics, a pandemic, and oppression of every kind. And then there are all the relationship challenges, and unexpected events in our personal lives, that cause us to wonder, where is God in all this?

There is no shortage of advice coming from voices that say we can't overcome our challenges, that we are not good enough, that we are not smart enough; there are voices that say things are more hopeless than ever, that we are so polarized we will never again agree on anything. In one respect, the voices are right. We are in need of a Savior. We need the power of Christ in our lives, and our faith might seem diminished right now. I think that the degree of faith we have is directly related to the amount of time we spend exercising it, which is to say, putting it into action.

A long line of faithful people through the ages have confessed with their lips that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and then they backed up their confession with action - proclaiming the Gospel, caring for the needy, giving of their time, talent and treasure to see that the work of the church continued through all those centuries of life's changes – including plenty of pandemics and political turmoil.

Last week our Vestry talked about how different church has become due to the pandemic. We considered what we have lost – some ways of being church may not return; we considered what we assumed – some things we assumed were really important no longer seem as important, and things we had not considered to be very important have become essential for ministry right now. Finally, we talked about what wants to emerge at Christ and Grace out of this experience of life in a pandemic. It will be an ongoing conversation and we hope every parishioner will join in the conversation.

As we discern where we are heading, there is one thing of which we can be certain. Saying Jesus is the Christ, saying we are here to share the good news that Jesus is the Christ, must be followed by action. Like Peter, we might make mistakes, but the point is to keep trying. Despite Peter's imperfections, Jesus gave him the keys to the kingdom.

We have been given keys to the mission and ministry of Christ and Grace. Whether or not we can precisely define who Jesus is or is not, whether or not we can all agree on theology or doctrine, or national politics, we are here. Something draws us here, just as it drew those we love who came here before us.

Who will we be for those who are not yet here, and for those in the community that surrounds us? God is asking us, “Who do you say that I am?” God willing, we will answer by both our words and our actions as we, like God's children, share our experience of Christ in this place.