



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 12, 2021

Scripture Passages: Proverbs 1:20-33; Mark 8:27-38

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

In the gospel today Jesus demonstrates the power of a good question; the right question.

Who do people say that I am?

Who do you say that I am?

Surely these questions are among the most fascinating, the most important that Jesus asks in the Gospels?

These are question that still garner attention, still provoke and inspire reaction today?

They're asked in an intriguing way too. Jesus doesn't say, "this is who I am" he's asking who do people say that I am?

How am I perceived?

Now in an age of influencers, of bloggers and vloggers; where influence sells, where reputation is monetized to a degree that defies logic, where perception seems to be stronger than fact, surely we can understand the power of this question for Jesus?

I know his disciples could understand its power too. During his earthly ministry, he and they literally lived the power of his reputation as a teacher and healer of people.

The spread of the mission they were entrusted with and, frankly, their safety rose or fell on the power of who people said Jesus was so it's interesting that Jesus checks in with them about that.

But for my money, the more important question is the second one – "Who do YOU say that I am?"

Because the answer to those two questions probably shouldn't be the same. The disciples had an intimate relationship with Jesus – a relatively public figure.

And as we all know, those closest to us know us the best. If you're a public figure, you become a two-dimensional character in some ways – can't be helped – it's the nature of any position like that. But those nearest you – who eat and drink with you, who rub shoulders with you day in day out, see you in good moods and bad, have a purchase on the content of your character and more broadly still, on who you really are.

So Peter says: "You are the Messiah."

Interesting that it seems only Peter was brave enough to speak what I can only imagine was a truth that was slowly creeping up on him – after adding up all of what Jesus' said, what he did, how connected he was to God the Father, and how he moved through this world with them.

Only Peter, with that impulsive but endearing honesty of his, said what was on his heart.

"You are the Messiah."

Just as an aside, I am always grateful for Peter. I think in some ways in the Gospel stories, he represents all of us. He's by turns impulsive, amazingly perceptive and then at other times slow-witted (I'm sorry, but it's true) resistant and outright rebellious with regard to what the good news of Jesus requires of him.

And aren't we all all of these things at times? It's comforting to know that the range of human response to Jesus is present in the Gospel – that somehow legitimizes our own responses.

Anyway, back to that answer, . . .

Now if you've been reading the Gospel of Mark up to this point you might be surprised at Peter's answer. Because up til now, the disciples have largely thought – well they've thought the same as many people today think about Jesus – that he's a good man, a great teacher, he's special and impressive and certainly worthy of emulation, but the Messiah?

That's a whole different thing. I mean, what does that even mean?

Which is what makes Peter's statement so surprising – and so wonderful. It seems that it was some of flash of insight.

But holdup, in the next breath, it becomes clear that what Peter was thinking about the Messiah certainly wasn't what Jesus knew to be the truth.

Jesus does his best to deliver the news that he was not the kind of Messiah that was going to conquer the earth with armies and slay all their enemies, and restore Israel to some position of power, rather that he was, in the prophet Isaiah's words, the suffering servant kind of Messiah with a heavenly kingdom that included more than Israel and it was all going to get very difficult for him very soon. Peter's not too happy about this.

And without knowing it, he makes acute the friction between God's ways and ours.

You see, Jesus recognizes the problem with Peter's dismay: the temptation to disconnect from the Father's will and pursue his own.

Peter is setting his mind on human things and not on the things of God. While Jesus is literally on God's mission, so he's not having any of Peter's nonsense.

Peter wants Jesus to avoid his reality. And Jesus wants Peter to come face to face with it.

That's really important for us to mark here as followers of the Christ. Discipleship means tuning OUR ways to God's ways.

Because when we get trapped in the prison of our own interest, our own wants, or in what "I" deserve, and in defending those things against any who threaten them, it becomes a place that robs us of life itself.

You see, what Jesus means when he says, "lose your life and then you will find it" what he means is that we only truly discover the life and love that God has to offer us when we let go all the things we cling to so tightly in that small place of "I" and open ourselves – no, surrender ourselves - to the people around us in compassion, understanding, and love and service.

It's then that we can be open enough to receive the life and the love that God wants to give each of us every day.

This is a true struggle – this is our reality.

And you know, we know this: that the more we give, the more we receive; the more we seek to give up some of our opinion or will the more, the more room we create for others to flourish and be safe; and the more we love, the more we are loved.

We know this, I'm sure. But we forget. Even more than that, we're encouraged in this world not to believe it.

We are encouraged to operate from a deep place of "I" – although at moments during this Pandemic that reality has been displaced and our better angels have prevailed, thanks be to God.

But the reality is, most of the time we are encouraged by political expedience, by being appealed to as economic and political units, to focus on me, on what I might lose or gain; in short on deeply human things.

No wonder Wisdom cries out in the streets! Her protest is one that should go heart-deep with us too.

She cries out because the source of all wisdom is love and the goal of all wisdom is love too.

So as disciples, if all our actions in this world arise from love and are directed toward love, we can't go wrong.

We literally cannot go wrong if that's the case.

That should moderate every word that comes out of our mouths; it should mitigate every self-serving impulse; and it should direct every decision we make.

This is a whole life commitment here folks so it touches our wallets, the ballot box, every conversation we have about vaccines and every anguished fight we have about the climate crisis.

It's hard, it's sacrificial but it's the only way.

Who do people say that I am?

I know one thing for sure. If our Jesus, our God looks and sounds a whole lot like us; holds the same opinions, has the same likes and dislikes, then we are probably not on the right trail.

Because the God of Isaac and Abraham, the God of the prophets, Jesus who scattered the money changers in the temple and called out the religious leaders for hypocrisy, Jesus, the Christ whose redemptive love led him to sacrifice himself for our sake, does not fit neatly into a party or a piety.

Our God – the three in one – is fascinatingly challenging. And if we are not challenged to the point of sacrifice in our faith, then I suggest that we are not encountering the full picture of the Holy One.

That's the tough bit – we can't cherry pick the easy stuff and make a religion of that. We have to work at the hard bits to try and understand them in the light of God's law of love – and be open to different interpretations of scripture and it's out working in our life together that helps us to align our life in Christ, in community, in society with that law of love.

If we are out of charity and love with our neighbour, it's a pretty safe bet that we need to do some soul searching as to why, and be willing to draw ourselves into line with Gospel behaviour.

That may be the biggest and hardest challenge we face in these fractious times.

Our patience seems to have worn thin and bearing with one another in difference across a spectrum of issues has become arduous work that almost defeats us and the world cannot become a better place if that remains the case.

Juxtapose that with Jesus. He comes to us and doesn't just say words of self-sacrifice, he also lives them, giving himself in the most total way possible – giving his life - out of love for all people and creating a pool of life, a path for living and loving that far surpasses anything an intensely self-focused way of life can offer.

And it's not what Peter expects – it's not what any of them expect.

They too, are children of this world. They imagined that the secret to life was strength and power rather than vulnerability and love.

And so they interpreted Jesus' miraculous acts as demonstrations of power rather than manifestations of love.

And when Jesus describes the greatest act of love – giving his life for them and the world – and then asking them to do the same - they can only object because it's so difficult, so sacrificial, and so beyond them at that moment.

So. Back to our reality. I don't know about you, but I realize that I'm not so far from the disciples at times - I have also struggled to understand God's seemingly impossible plans for me, for us -- and I also sometimes wonder how I can possibly deny myself, take up my cross and follow Jesus, if following means losing my life?

But that's when I'm reminded that God who raised Jesus from the dead can raise us from our defeats again and again. So we rely on that - thanks be to God – and focus on what God wants, what God's will is.

And that should guide our actions in the present crisis. Because what God wants is so much more than we can ask or imagine: God wants us to love each other as we have been loved by God. By our love for each other people will know us to be God's own. By sacrificing a little bit of "I" for "us."

By trusting in God's provision and by not giving in to the pressure to concentrate on me, myself and I. By working to become ever more Christ-like in losing ourselves in order to find ourselves.

Who do you say that I am?

You, you Lord, are the Messiah.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.