

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

September 13, 2015; the 16th Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Proverbs 1:20-23; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38.

What Do We Say About Jesus?

On this Welcome Back Sunday, we are faced with a foundational text of the Christian faith---one that is both challenging and inspiring.

Jesus asks his friends, "Who do you say that I am?"

Challenging because perhaps we like Jesus' first friends, were not sure what to say; and inspiring because God really cares that we are part of the divine story---that we engage the question.

Not a bad text to consider on this day; in fact, we might even think of it as God's gift to us, a gift to unwrap on Welcome Back Sunday.

What does it have to teach us about who we are as a faith community?

As we are getting back into rhythm of the school year and the program year of church, it might be enlightening to answer Jesus' question and see how our answers have an impact...how our answers as individuals and as a church community have an impact on our lives and our life together.

Today I will reflect primarily about our life together, but we would have no life together if we did not as individuals believe something about God, about Jesus, and the Spirit, that keeps us coming back to church and to this great adventure that we share as people on a faith quest together.

How do we answer Jesus' question?

How does what we do answer the question?

Actions do speak louder than words.

When people look at our church, who we are, what we do...do they know how we answer the question of who Jesus is for us?---can they tell by looking at us?

If they had a chance to visit our ministry fair today after this service or spend a month with us seeing what we do, what we offer, what would they think?

They would see information about our work with those in need, through the food pantry, Christ Families, outreach to the village of Mzula in Tanzania;---all this points to a desire to serve Christ by serving our neighbors...our belief that Jesus came to help, to seek and to save.

They would see our rich worship and prayer life, in what we do on Sundays, and with healing services, and silent/centering prayer services, choir, music, altar guild---all this points to our desire to deepen our relationship with God, believing that relationship with God is possible, Christ is alive, and that God/Jesus/Spirit, calls forth from us love and praise.

They would see all the formation opportunities, through education on Sundays, weekday Bible study, spiritual direction groups.---all this is to say, our desire to grow in our knowledge and love of Christ.

They would see our care for the property, and our focus on giving generously to support this church and all that we do for others ---which points to a desire to be good stewards of the resources God has given us, knowing that God is the Creator.

They would see our prayer shawls, our prayer lists, our meal ministry to those who are ill or recovering from surgery, which points to

our desire to be part of Christ's mission of healing and
compassionate care.

They would see that this church has a rector again, which points to our
desire to trust God, have hope, forgive the past, and move into
God's future as a community, that our faith helps us make a
commitment, that we believe in Resurrection, that God
makes all things new.

All this says a lot about who we say Jesus is.
It shows much about our beliefs about God and our belief that God is
with us.

No one, no one church, would try to do all this, and so much more that I
have not mentioned today, without believing that God is
with us...that we are about
God's work,
God's mission,
God's transformation of the world.

And Jesus is the One who showed us how this is done.

Jesus names his plans, his sense of who he is for God, when he read
from the prophet Isaiah that day in the Temple...that day when he
surprised everyone, astounded them by saying:
"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring
good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the
captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed
go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."¹

It is a great thing to have faith and beliefs, but as the letter of James says,

¹ Luke 4:18-19

“faith without works is dead.”

The full verse in chapter 2:26 of James, “Just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead.”

Just as our spirit is dynamic in the world, so too our faith is dynamic in the world when we are about the things of God, and answering Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am” through our actions.

And as Jesus is reported to have said in Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 7:...not everyone who says they know me does know me... you will know those who do by their fruits---You will know the ones who have a relationship with me in by what they do.

When we consider this church, this community of faith---what we do, this points to who we say Jesus is---the One who brings us together, the One who is a healer, the One who seeks justice for the poor, the One gives us hope and strength, the One who calls us to be Christ for others in our church and wider community.

We reflect what we believe about God in how we move forward even when we don’t know for sure where the destination will be or what it will look like.

Take up your cross and follow me, Jesus says.

Not that we will be able to control or fix the world, taking up our cross and following Jesus means letting go of control, doing when we know that we will never be done, but by so doing, we embody Christ in the world, for the world...and that is important, that makes a difference.

Such commitment to Christ, to God’s desires for us and our world, this is what God welcomes us back to again and again.

God is always welcoming us back!

In what we hear today of Jesus’ exchange with Peter, we have a great

example of one who got the answer right, “you are the Messiah.” but then got the next part wrong...Peter couldn’t imagine the future to which Jesus was calling him.

This sort of reaction to who Jesus says he is, Verna Dozier, writes about in her wonderful book *The Dream of God: A Call to return*.

She writes: “I believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, he by whom the reign of God has been made known---and he whom the institutional church, from the resurrection community to the present day, has rejected since the day of his death in favor of something more reasonable, more controlled and more controllable, more human.”²

Last Sunday in discussing justice for the working poor, I said the we are here to share with each other and the world what we believe about God, and what we can discern, limited as it may be, what we think God's dream is for the world.

Peter was hearing God’s dream for the world, which was going to most likely involve the suffering and death of Jesus, as we know it did. Suffering, death, rising again...Peter could not get his head around it...it was nothing that he had ever seen.

Jesus says get out of my way then, get behind me Satan.

Don’t set your mind on what you already know Peter, human things, but set your mind on what you can’t possibly yet know in full, divine things.

Peter couldn’t imagine it, so, at that moment, he couldn’t go there with Jesus.

But later, Jesus would welcome Peter back.

Welcome back.

² Verna J. Dozier, *The Dream of God: A Call To Return*, New York: Seabury Books, 2006, EPub, Loc 58 of 1742. Originally published: Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley, c 1991.

In many ways, the dream of God is beyond our understanding...and that's just the deal...given that, we are called to follow the dream, trusting God, knowing it is going to feel awkward or scary or unfamiliar sometimes...that's ok.

We follow the dream based on what we do know through what we know about Jesus, who we say he is, and what we know about God at work in the world before Jesus and to this very moment.

Based on what we do know, we follow that dream....the dream of God, as individuals and as a community.

And we do this not by seeing clearly the road ahead, but by taking one step at a time ,,one day at a time....we live into the dream.

We can even become God's dream for the world.

Amen.