

Pentecost 16b, September 12, 2021

Mark 8:27-38 LFLC

Setting aside Peter's reply for a moment, let me ask you the question addressed to him:  
 "Who do you think Jesus is?" "Who do you think Jesus is?"

Do you think of him as a well-known figure of history or legend or myth  
 like King Arthur or Joan of Arc or Martin Luther?  
 Because if he is nothing more than that—  
     nothing more than a stone-dead celebrity of the past--  
 then we can dismiss him as unimportant,  
 as someone who has no real place in our lives  
 and no real value or connection to our age.

Who do you think Jesus is?

Do you think of him as a wonder worker, a kind of Divine Houdini?  
 Because if he is nothing more than Mr. Wizard,  
     then, most of the time, he is of little use to us. . .  
     other than to be pulled out of the hat periodically  
     and made to perform if we are in trouble or sick  
 or simply in the market for something completely different.

Who do you think Jesus? And what does he mean to you?

I know these sound like rather silly questions to be asking church members—  
 people who claim to belong to this Jesus. . .but they need to be asked anyway—  
     because the answer you give will tell a great deal  
     about how important Jesus is to you. . .  
     and whether he holds first or second or twenty-third place in your life.

They will tell how seriously take his promises of forgiveness and peace,  
 and how much weight you give to his call to follow him,  
 to bear the cross with him, to lose your life for him and in him.

So, who do you think Jesus is?

But maybe before you answer that question,  
 perhaps you need to ask and and answer a prior one first,  
 namely, "Who do you think you are?"

A man is complaining about his psychiatrist, saying,  
 "I pay the guy \$100 an hour and all he does is ask me  
 the same question my father used ask me all the time:  
 "Who do you think you are anyway?"

So, who do you think you are anyway?

Are you the person whose face stares back at you from the mirror every morning—  
 the person whose face is happy on the outside  
 but whose heart is fearful and anxious inside;  
 or the person who always looks angry and frowning outside  
 because inside you are always frightened and lonely?

Who are you anyway?

Are you the calm and cool person everyone admires and looks up to  
 because you are able to handle stress and problems with an unflappable ease. . .  
 while behind that cool exterior, your insides are churning  
 at the thought of failing—and it is the fear of failure that drives you far harder  
 than does the assurance of success?

Who are you anyway?

Are you the person who comes to church regularly, knows the liturgy off by heart,  
 sings the hymns with gusto, prays with fervor  
 and greets visitor with enthusiasm—but all the while  
 you are deathly afraid of God because you think God is just sitting there  
 like a Federal tax auditor waiting to jump all over you  
 for any and every little mistake you have made?

Oh, sure, you talk a lot about God. . .and about how much God loves people—  
 but all that “blah, blah, blah” stuff outside is simply designed  
 to cover up your conviction deep down inside  
 that God couldn’t possibly love you. . .not really love you. . .  
 because, no matter how hard you try,  
 you can’t seem to live up to God’s expectations of you?

Who are you really? And what do you really think of Jesus?

And how does he fit in with the real person  
 you keep hidden behind that mask you are wearing this morning. . .  
 the person crouching down behind all those walls  
 you have spent a lifetime erecting?

When my sons were young, I used to worry that one of them would get into major trouble,  
 and when asked how he could have done such a terrible deed  
 and brought such disgrace to his father—a man of God, a pillar of the church—

I worried that he would say this about me:

“My dad isn’t what you think he is.

I’ve seen him at home with his robes off,  
 and I know what he is really like.”

And I was pretty sure that is what he would say about me

because it is pretty much what I say about myself a lot. . .right now:

“I am not what or who you think I am.”

And because I know what I am like inside,  
 it is often difficult for me. . .as it may be for you. . .  
 to believe that this Jesus really loves me, that he really accepts me. . .  
 really says “Yes’ to me. . .just as I am. . .just the way I am.

The story is told of a certain pastor who came from a famous family  
 well-known for its long tradition of leadership in the Progressive Conservative Party.

One day, one of his parishioners came to him to confess a terrible sin.  
 “It is so awful,” the troubled man said, “that I don’t know if can even tell you about it.”  
 “No sin is too great to be forgiven,” the pastor said. “Tell me. What did you do?”

“Well,” the man said, “you know that Liberal Party candidate who was in town last year?  
 I was the one who started the false rumour that caused him  
 to lose his seat in parliament and that ended up  
 ruining his business and destroying his marriage.”

To this shocking confession the pastor replied:

“Brother Jones, I’m not interested in your politics.  
 Only in your sins. Only in your sins.”

Part of learning who we are means learning  
 that we can’t divorce what we do from what we are.

“You are what you eat” people say. “Practice what you preach” people say.

Indeed, it seems whether people are Christians or not,  
 they still recognize the truth of what James and Jesus say today—  
 namely, that you can’t separate what you believe from the way you behave.

Faith and works are inextricably linked together.

I think that’s why Jesus followed up Peter’s confession of faith by saying:

“If anyone wants to come with me, they must deny themselves,  
 take up their cross and follow me.”

Now, denying ourselves means at least two things: First, it literally means to forget ourselves—  
 because, in a very real sense, it isn’t important what or who we say we are.

What is important is what Jesus says we are.

And so what is important is that you trust him

when he tells you that what and who you are is his. . .

that what you are is forgiven. . .that what you are is accepted. . .

that what you is loved. . .and that, as far as he is concerned,

you are worth the life he gave for you. . .and worthy of the life he gives to you.

So, please believe him when he tells you that about yourself.

And equally important is that you also believe Jesus when he says

that now he wants you to give your life back to him—so he can use it. . .

so he can use you. . .me. . .us. . .to heal and rescue others

by giving ourselves to others and for others.

That's the second meaning of denying ourselves:

Being willing to put ourselves as Christ's disposal—  
 allowing his will to shape ours. . .letting his death change our lives.  
 To take up the cross. . .to follow Jesus. . .to lose your life. . .  
 to deny ourselves. . .all those phrases mean essentially the same thing:  
 To be prepared to set aside our own needs  
 in order to get involved with the needs of others;  
 to be ready and willing to take their pain on your shoulders  
 and to place our hope and trust in their hearts.

That's what James meant this morning in the Second Reading

when he told us to put our faith into action, to put our money where our mouths are.

“Faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead.”

Or, as Jesus phrases it: “Whoever wants to save their life will lose it.”

Those are hard words to hear, especially for people like us these days

who are accustomed and encouraged to look out first for good old #1.

And yet those words are not meant to threaten us

into giving ourselves to others out of guilt or fear or even the hope of reward.

Instead, they are meant to tantalize us. . .to tempt us, if you will. . .

into taking the risk of finding out what life was really meant to be like. . .

and what we were and really intended to be like.

In the Gospel for today, Jesus is telling us plainly and clearly

that it is only by giving away who we are and what we have

that we can ever hope to find that which is really important

about life and faith and about ourselves.

And over the next few weeks, we are probably going to hear a lot more

about what there is to find and how we go about finding it—

about who we are and where we are going

and about what God has in store for us along the way.

But, for today, let me close by saying that, in a sense,

the old cliché is truer than we ever realized:

That it really isn't what we know but who we know

that makes life worth living. . .and makes worth giving.

Knowing Jesus: He is the only one

who is worth giving everything up for. . .worth giving ourselves away for. . .

because he is the only who can and will give everything back to us. . .

everything and more. . .so much, much more.

Amen.

SDG