

Sermon June 24, 2007

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Proper 7 C

What would you think if you were down on Bethesda Row and, say, you were sitting at a table browsing in a book at Barnes and Noble, and someone came up quietly and asked you, "What do you think about Jesus? Who do you say that he is?"

My guess is that most of us would back away from that kind of dialogue. However, you are invited into that kind of faith discussion this morning when we all become involved, with questions and answers as a child is baptized. We have taken part in this baptismal liturgy before, but the Gospel reading this morning may help you make your participation more than just a ritual. Jesus is asking in this Gospel passage what may seem to be a curious question, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" Was that a rhetorical question? Did Jesus *need* that kind of acclamation—like a would-be hoping to get space in People Magazine or on You Tube? That wasn't Jesus' intention, as then he makes clear, "But what about *you*?" he asks of his disciples, "who do you say that I am?"

That's a question that for Christians underlies how we respond to all the questions of life. For finding one's way in the world today is a challenge for all of us. Increasingly we are seeing a breakdown of family and community values in our society, and many of our young people, rich and poor alike, are growing up morally confused. All of us, and especially our children need an authentic hope, a sense of purpose, and a steady internal compass to navigate the choppy and changing seas they must face on the journey to adulthood.

As I've said before that's a journey that keeps on going for all of us. A culture that too often glamorizes materialism over faith, getting over giving, indifference over compassion, can leave us all—no matter what age we are—feeling spiritually impoverished. So at the heart of all of the reasons that you came here this morning I pray that it will be to find food for your mind, heart, and soul.

When Jesus is asking his followers, "So what about you? Who do you say I am?" He is asking his followers to identify themselves in relationship to Him. Engaging in the dialogue of the baptism service should remind us that Jesus wouldn't let us keep ducking that key question.

If you answer Jesus as Peter did by saying "You are the Messiah of God", you had better remember the old adage, "Be careful what you wish for!" Because Jesus' response to that declaration was not exactly one that we would call "P.C." He says to his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake....will save it"

Let them deny themselves? Is that good news? Do these sound like strange and off-putting words to you today? In the decades of material abundance we have created we even think sometimes that we can create our own spiritual abundance. That of course is the self-help notion. Barnes and Noble and Borders bookstores can show you books by the crate-full, videotapes and audiotapes, all designed to assist us or guide us as we try to help ourselves become more successful, have peace of mind, how to love ourselves, how to—some way—be transformed persons.

But we need more than that. I've seen the movie "Patton" recently for perhaps the fifth or sixth time, and "deep-down" I think that many people must still believe in Patton's style of arrogant, lone-ranger, "prima donna"

leadership. On the surface of things it still works for some people and for the short term.

But I submit that in this increasingly interdependent world we are gradually learning a style of leadership where everyone gives so that all can receive. Sometimes this is called “servant leadership”. In churches this can be called “mutual ministry.” Those are big words: maybe a simple story will be more helpful—the one about prisoners slowly starving to death because their captors had placed their food three feet away and given them spoons that were three feet long. They all tried unsuccessfully to cope with getting the food up to their mouths in that situation, until someone discovered the way that all could be fed. Each person would reach out to feed someone else, and another in turn would feed him or her. That’s a homely way of illustrating the big concept of “mutual ministry” or “mutual interdependence.”

That’s simply putting into practice behaviors that find their roots as old as the essence of Jesus’ words in Matthew, Mark, and Luke: “the person who tries to find personal fulfillment by always trying to be number one, will lose it. And those who offer their lives, lose their lives for my sake, will find it.” You find a life really worth living by giving it away. You save your life by spending it, and for Jesus that meant taking up a cross.

I think I’ve mentioned before that in my car I listen mostly to the all-news station on FM 103.5. Probably you too have heard the message sponsored by Fidelity Investments, “Choose to Save.” That’s not bad advice on one level, but if you’ve concentrated your life on just “making it”, building up an estate, gaining as much as you can and holding on to that as an ultimate goal of life, I’m sure the words from Jesus must sound strange indeed. They shake the basic assumptions and values and beliefs that have been ingrained in us by what we read or see on television about life and society.

But Jesus did that with his disciples over and over again! He took old truths and shook them up into new wineskins. By using paradoxes to express new ways of looking at truth about life, and then by going to the Cross to express those truths about self-sacrifice in the most ultimate way—his death—he literally turned the world inside out and upside down.

Jesus whole life was a paradox, but paradoxically after all these centuries we still need to absorb into our spiritual bloodstream the legacy of his life. So the question comes to all of us: What are you doing with your life? Can we go beyond the small boxes in our thinking where we have tried to arrange life in an orderly way? Surveys and polls tell me more and more that there are plenty of people out there besides me who think our country's "leaders" are not doing a good enough job. But that causes me to wonder, what are you and I doing, on an everyday basis, to make things better?

Are you open to finding a peace that is not just the absence of hostilities but is an active dynamic of *reconciliation* working among people and nations? In the beautiful words of St. Francis, "in our giving we receive, and in forgiving we are forgiven." Are you working on discovering that dynamic in the small circles of your own home, office, and parish church?

To say, YES! I want more, is the first step in opening up a lifelong discovery of meaning and fulfillment beyond our human gaining, saving, finding. It is to take the dialogue of our baptismal liturgy this morning into the dialogue of life as a searcher who asks, "Lord, how is it that you will show yourself to us in a world that needs to discover you?"

Then the Lord God who continually surprises us with new ways to disclose his presence will say, "If you love me, you will keep my word, you will save your life by letting go of your old confining and protective ways of living, and you will gain a life truly worth living by reaching out to spend it, and to sharing it with others." AMEN