

“Shifting Gears”

Proverbs 1:20-33, Mark 8: 27-38

15th Sunday after Pentecost, September 13, 2009

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I spent last weekend visiting my parents at their summer home in New Hampshire. On Saturday night we went down to the “Center” one last time. The Center is what they call the boardwalk at Hampton Beach. My children and I enjoy walking around, buying fudge to take home and taking in the local sites. We always encounter a few colorful folks to keep the evening especially entertaining. There is a man that stands out in front of the McDonald’s offering folks his “wisdom” and a pamphlet outlining the steps one needs to take to avoid entering into the realms of hell. This man seems much more interested in warning you about your inevitable ascent to hell than helping you find your way into heaven. Honestly, I think people think he’s a bit of a nut, but he has every right to share his faith with willing recipients. I don’t think he believes he can save your soul by handing you a pamphlet, however, I do believe he hopes to make a connection that will empower someone to begin that personal relationship with Christ that he believes will save their soul.

I always avoid this man. After all, my soul has already been saved. I don’t need him or his pamphlet to scare me into turning my life around. I imagine I avoid him also because I don’t want to be confronted with my own failures in the discipleship department. I keep walking because even though we don’t share the same theology, he is much more passionate about his. Peter’s encounter with Jesus in the gospel story this morning strikes me in a similar way. Peter thinks he has this discipleship thing all figured out and is eager to follow Jesus. He is passionate enough about Jesus to make this bold profession of faith. Then Jesus blows his perceptions completely apart. Peter finally gets the answer right and even though he’s technically right, Jesus shows him how wrong he really is.

The kooky man on the corner has it right. Discipleship is about a personal relationship with Jesus. It is not enough to know what others say or believe about Jesus. It is not enough to read a two page pamphlet and think you have it all figured out. You have to take it many steps further. In order to be a follower, I must be able to say what I believe. Jesus asks us, “But who do YOU say that I am?” Something profound happens when we are confronted with that question. The theologian Thomas Woodward says, “so Jesus asks, ‘but who do you say that I am?’ and the ground shifts. It is no longer sufficient to quote Borg or Crossan, Barclay or Spong. The old saw, ‘most of us want a relationship with God, but only as a consultant,’ no longer holds. We are now dealing with mystery. We are now forced to face our fears and our inadequacy. The Christ stands before us and asks us to respond from what is deepest and most sacred and most hidden within us.”

That is why Peter responds to Jesus so angrily. You are the Christ, the anointed one, the Messiah. I finally get it right and now you tell me I have it all wrong? We want easy answers that make sense. We don’t want to look deeply into a mystery. Jesus tells us things we are not ready to hear. He says we will not inherit power as the world defines it.

Our lives will not be free of suffering or turmoil or pain or anguish. We will not have it easier than others if we choose to follow. On the contrary, Jesus tells the disciples that as the Messiah he will suffer, be rejected and ultimately die. He tells them that on the third day he will rise again. The rising part gets lost in a tidal wave of disbelief and grief. We can not hear the promise, nor can we fully understand it. Peter wants him to stop. Peter wants him to take it all back, say it isn't so, to say he doesn't really mean what he has just said. Jesus puts Peter in his place. Not because he is angry with Peter, but because he loves him deeply. Jesus confirms what he says is not a lie. It will come to be precisely as he has told them.

Jesus then turns from his intimate group of disciples to the crowd and lays it all on the line for anyone who wishes to listen. If you want to follow, then take up your cross. If you want to continue on this journey with me then be prepared to have your whole life turned upside down and inside out. In order to find your life you will have to lose it. Jesus' life was marked by profound sacrifice and so will ours if we choose to follow. Jesus offers the crowd a stunning invitation. Imagine how difficult it must have been for them to say yes, count me in, sign me up! They had no idea what he was inviting them to do or become. They had no idea the profound mystery and joy of the resurrection. They had no idea and yet so many of them took that first step.

We gather again on this beautiful September morning ready to take another step on our faith journey. We shift gears from the lazy, easy pace of summer to the more rigorous pace of fall. Next week our children will fill the classrooms at High Street School eager to discover in powerfully new ways what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Our Middle School youth will embark on a new adventure in discipleship as they gather on Sunday afternoons. The Wednesday School staff has met and is preparing to welcome nearly a hundred high school youth to that amazing experience of discipleship. The Tuesday morning bible study resumes, committee meetings are in full swing, the calendar is overflowing with things to do, opportunities to serve, and commitments to fulfill.

Jesus invites us in the midst of all this doing to take a moment to reflect. As you make come to your next Trustee meeting perhaps you will turn off the radio and meditate on the lingering question... "but who do you say that I am?" If someone were to ask you this, what would you say? Why do you follow this crucified Christ? What difference does it make in your life? Why do you continue to take up your cross and follow? What does that cross feel like? What sacrifices does it call you to make?

In the words for meditation in the bulletin this morning I share a quote from the 20th century theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He said, "Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ." One can not be a Christian in word only. One is a Christian in both word and deed. You can only be a Christian when you give yourself; your whole self, over to Christ. We are Christians only when we are willing to take up our crosses and follow Jesus even into the dark and fearful places. For those of you who are unfamiliar with Bonhoeffer, he was killed at the age of 39 for conspiring to assassinate Hitler. He came to the United States in his twenties to study at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Many people believe Bonhoeffer could have

avoided returning to Germany by becoming a pastor or teacher here. He was greatly influenced by his experiences at the seminary, especially with the Black Church in Harlem that he attended frequently. He chose not to remain in the United States, but to return to Germany. There he became part of the Confessing Church that stood in vocal and passionate opposition to Hitler's regime. In a very real way Bonhoeffer took up his cross and was willing to suffer and be rejected, even die as a faithful disciple.

We are not called to sacrifice in the same way that Bonhoeffer did. However, we are constantly invited to reflect on our own discipleship. His witness leads me to consider where in my life have I remained silent in the face of opposition? We recently marked the 10th anniversary of the killings at Columbine High School in Colorado. I remember the young girl in the library who when asked if she believed in Jesus replied "yes" and one of the boys shot her anyway. Was she killed because of her faith or in spite of it? We will never know. I wonder if I could have been so brave at such a young age. She was a true disciple, willing to suffer and die for her faith.

We have far more challenges than those early disciples did. Our world is much more complex in the twenty first century. Despite the changing times the invitation still comes as it did two thousand years ago. Take up your cross and follow me. Lay aside the life you once knew in order to find a new life. Step into the mystery and trust that God will be your companion whenever you do. The writer Megan McKenna calls the Gospel of Mark "a primer on conversion, a summons to discipleship..." She says, "True discipleship calls us to sink further into the waters of our baptism, which are mysterious, fearful, and wondrously filled with grace." Discipleship comes in stages. In one stage we open ourselves to discover and ponder what the ancient stories tell us about Jesus. In the next stage, we make our own personal profession of faith and live our lives in light of this faith. We move between these two stages throughout our lives, learning and growing, seeking and finding, being invited and responding. We move from repeating what others say to living what we believe. Then having made that personal profession of faith, our lives are set in a new direction.

Jesus invites disciples in every age to make a decision. He asks, "will you follow me?" Are you willing to accept both the costs and joys of discipleship? I believe the gaping hole in our landscape tells the world that we are willing to follow Jesus, now and into the uncertain future. Jesus hopes that others will recognize us as his followers, not by what we say, but by how we live our lives. Oh, you are one of his followers? Yes I am. What was it that gave me away?

Amen

Source:

Thomas B. Woodward, "Who Do You Say That I Am?" Witness Magazine, September 13, 2006.

"Who Are You Jesus?" iucc reflections for September 13, 2009