

August 24, 2008

**Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost, Year A, Proper 16** (Matthew 16:13-20)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

*The Rev'd Elizabeth Shows Caffey, associate rector*

Good morning. It is good to be back with y'all. I have cherished the time to step away and focus on getting to know my daughter Madelynne. She is absolutely amazing (brilliant and super advanced for her age) – she is growing and changing each and every day. Thank you for all your well wishes and words of support. I look forward to sharing more with you as we reconnect in the coming weeks.

Peter knew Jesus. He knew this man Jesus in flesh and blood. They walked from town to town together preaching, healing and teaching. He watched as Jesus cared for the poor and the outcast, as he offered food to the hungry and hope to the powerless. He watched at times confused and at other times in wonderment as time and again Jesus went against the cultural norms and engaged in relationships that were forbidden by Jewish law: he healed the lepers, stopped the hemorrhaging of a bleeding woman, and cast out demons. Peter ate, slept, lived, and labored with this man. He knew Jesus as prophet, teacher, healer, and friend. He knew Jesus. That is until Jesus turns to him and says, “Who do you say that I am?” This should be an easy question, with all of their shared experiences Peter should know the answer no problem. But even with all this knowledge and time together Peter draws a blank, that is until he receives divine revelation to proclaim “you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” What once was hidden from all is now revealed. Jesus is the long awaited Messiah. This person Jesus is more than a prophet, more than a healer- he is God here and present among us. As the anointed one, Jesus holds the promise of a new kingdom, not one here on earth where wealth and power rule but the kingdom of heaven, a kingdom with mercy and reconciliation as its foundation.

“Who do you say that I am?” How do you answer that question? A friend comes up to you at a party and says you go to All Saints' right? Tell me about that. Why do you go there on Sunday morning when you could sleep-in instead? How do you answer this? How do you begin to explain who Jesus is for you? I am not asking you to have your Christology all worked out and be able to write a theological treatise – we can rely on theologians like Marcus Borg for that. What I am talking about is struggling with the question raised by the Christ, “Who do you say that I am?” Is Jesus for you simply a great prophet, a teacher, a moralist, a compass that you rely on to live a good life or is there something more? Has knowing Jesus to be the Son of the living God brought opportunities for transformation into your life – opportunities to show mercy, to work for reconciliation? Peter's life was transformed by this revelation. He was no longer simply a disciple of the prophet Jesus, but became the promise of continuity, the leadership for the community of the faithful following Jesus' death. The story will not end with Jesus. In Peter we are assured that God's mission of mercy and reconciliation will continue to be offered in community and the Kingdom of God will be realized.

We don't have the advantage of having met Christ in the flesh and blood. What we do have is the gift of community and our experience of God in relationship. Each Sunday we come together and we remember the story of our salvation in the proclamation of the gospel, in our prayers, and in the celebration of the Eucharist. We tell our communal story of faith and

salvation, but when we go out those doors, out into the rest of our lives somehow our mouths stop moving and we become silent about this story. Guess what folks – Christianity is no longer a secret movement, we gave that up more than a thousand years ago when Constantine made it lawful to be a Christian. It is okay to let people outside of this community know that you are Christian - it is okay to share with others the unconditional love that comes with being in relationship with the living God.

Outside these doors, we have neighbors who don't yet know the story of Jesus, who have not heard the good news that we proclaim and celebrate each and every Sunday together. It is vital that we are each able to articulate who Jesus is – not just for our own spiritual growth and development but also for the development of this community and the kingdom of God. We live in a day and age where more and more people are unchurched. They have not heard the story or experienced the abounding grace of Christian community. It is our task as disciples of Jesus to use our own gifts of the spirit, to each in our own way share our common story of God's redeeming love with our neighbor, with our colleagues, with our friends.

Who do you say that I am? The answer my friends is not found in the axioms and assertions of academics and theologians. It is found here among us in community- it is found in a living relationship with Christ and in our willingness to walk his way of service and transformative relationship. Faith in Jesus isn't primarily about saying or thinking correct things about him. Faith in Jesus is following him, serving those the world despises without any guarantee of earthly glory and success. Faith is a willingness to share the scorn that others heap upon the outcast. Faith in Jesus offers us opportunity to engage the world in new ways, offering mercy and forgiveness instead of holding on to our resentment and anger. In a world filled with conflict faith is working for reconciliation instead of turning to retribution. Proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah transforms not only our hearts, but has the power to transform how we engage with the world outside those doors.

We have a story to share with the world. How do you answer when Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?"