

Sunday, September 12, 2021
Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 19 (Year B)

Mark 8.27-38

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/1028962657850545>

(Sermon begins at about 22:20)

“Who Do You Say That You Are?”

There is no denying that there are those events in our lives which define who we are. Sometimes in big ways and sometimes in small ways. Our experiences shape who we are, one moment at a time. Many of those moments, many of those experiences, are pretty mundane, having little impact on defining who we are. Whether we had cereal or bacon and eggs for breakfast probably will not make a difference on who we are, on how we define ourselves. But some things have a profound impact on who we are, on how we define ourselves. The choice of job or profession. The choice of who to marry. The choice of whether to even marry or not. Having children or not. All those major decisions that we have control over add up to define who we are.

Then there are those things that happen to us, that we have no choice about, that nonetheless can shape who we are. Decisions made by our parents when we were young. Decisions made by our employers. A serious illness or accident. The death of a loved one. You get the idea. Such things have an impact on how we view the world and how we view ourselves. On how we define ourselves.

Then there are those larger societal events or experiences that similarly shape, even change, how we view the world. And as a result, how we define ourselves. We have experienced some of that over the last year and a half. For some people, the pandemic has brought significant changes, such as loss of employment or the decision to move to a more affordable area because of the increased ability to work remotely. For some, this has brought less significant changes, but changes that nonetheless reshape and redefine who they are. Such as a renewed focus on self-care or taking up a new hobby.

And then there are those events like what happened 20 years ago yesterday: September 11, 2001. 9/11. The ways in which that single event changed our lives, individually and collectively, are undeniable. It is virtually impossible to list all the ways our lives have been impacted by that horrific and tragic day, which saw the loss of nearly 3,000 lives, the destruction of the iconic World Trade Center and damage to the Pentagon. For some people, the events of that day were catastrophic, with the loss of loved ones. And for many, there continue to be ongoing effects of trauma. All of this forever altering their sense of who they are, how they define themselves.

For many of us—most of us—there may not have been such significant changes. Not anything that radically changed how we view ourselves. But one thing is certain, even if we did not personally experience a catastrophic loss that day, our individual and collective world view, our

identity as a nation and a people, and by extension, our individual sense of identity, was impacted by the events of that day and the aftermath. We all felt more vulnerable, less safe on our home territory. Many became more suspicious of those who looked different than they do—particularly of those who looked like the terrorists who perpetrated the atrocities of that day. And while the effects may have seemed to diminish over time, I question whether that is really the case. Or have we just gotten used to the “new normal” that resulted? Things that we have grown accustomed to, such that, while extraordinary at the time, are now commonplace. Like the fact that we now have to go through extensive security checkpoints to board a plane or to get into some public buildings. Like the fact that we now contend with heightened surveillance and security measures virtually everywhere we go—whether we are aware of them or not. And apart from the many changes in practices and regulations imposed as part of the Patriot Act and the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security, we have all, generally speaking, just naturally become more aware of our surroundings, of the need to take extra precautions to keep ourselves safe. All now part of everyday life. Part of who we are, of how we view the world, of how we define ourselves.

Today’s Gospel touches on this same issue. The issue of how we define ourselves. And how we define others—be it accurately or not. Our Gospel reading starts off with Jesus asking his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” (Mk 8.27). They have various responses: John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets. All of which are wrong, of course. But Jesus presses the issue: “But who do you say that I am?” (Mk 8.29a). Those who knew him better than any other human beings—those who had been with him constantly for nearly three years, living with him, working with him, hearing him teach, watching him work, observing him as he proclaimed the Good News of God’s love in word and action. Peter gets it right: “You are the Messiah” (Mk 8.29b).

What ensues is Jesus’ first prediction of his passion. That he would “undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mk 8.31). While they probably didn’t get it at the time, he was telling his disciples that this is what it really means that he is the Messiah. This is his identity. This is what shapes his world view. This is what shapes his every action. Particularly from here on out, as he moves ever closer to Jerusalem and fulfilling his destiny, living into his identity as Messiah.

But this is not just about how Jesus defines himself. It is also about how he defines his followers and how his followers define themselves. What we hear today is also a teaching about the meaning of true discipleship. Which is essentially summed up in his statement, “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, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it” (Mk 8.34-35). For Jesus’ original audience, the disciples, but even for those who followed him during the first couple of centuries of the Christian era, being one of his followers was dangerous. Take up your cross had a very literal meaning. At that time, crucifixion was a very real possibility for all followers of Jesus.

Following Jesus was serious business. And still is. Following Jesus meant, and still means, placing God’s concerns, God’s work, before all else. Being a Christian is not just about something that we do for a couple of hours on Sunday. It is not just about some kind acts we do

every now and then when we happen to think about it. Being Christian is meant to be our identity. Our primary identity. We follow Jesus. Not just when it is convenient, but all the time. That is what it means to take up our cross. In taking up our cross, we are taking up the work of Christ to proclaim the Good News of God's love in word and action. In all our words and actions. Not just some of them, not just some of the time. Do we get it right all the time? No, of course not. But being a Christian also means that we keep trying. Precisely because being Christian is not just how we define ourselves. It is what defines all that what we do.

When 9/11 happened, I was doing my Ministry Study Year internship at St. George's in Riverside. The Sunday after the terrorist attacks, the church was packed. There were probably twice the number of people than on a normal Sunday. Many whom we had never seen before. People coming looking for something. Looking for comfort in the wake of 9/11. Looking for something to help them make sense of, to find some sort of meaning in, what had happened the previous Tuesday. I remember having a conversation with some parishioners the following week. How maybe if there was anything good that came out of 9/11, it was the fact that people were coming together in unity, demonstrating a level of compassion no known before. That they were reconnecting with God, with the church. Perhaps even finding God and the church for the first time. That the life-changing events of the previous week had resulted in a shift in people's perspectives, in their priorities. That people were reconnecting with one another and with God. But the next Sunday, there were fewer people in church. And the Sunday after that? Attendance was back to normal. No fundamental shift in people's religious lives after all. What we experienced was a momentary blip. That in a time of tragedy, people wanted to come to Jesus for some momentary comfort. Only to return to the status quo.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not judging those people who showed up for a Sunday or two after 9/11 seeking comfort. Thank God we were there to be able to provide what those people needed. But at the same time, it shows that we often miss the point about what the church is for. About what it means to be Christians. Sure, part of our job is to provide comfort in times of crisis. But there is so much more to what it means to be church, what it means to be Christian. We see this in our Gospel, with the initial interaction between Jesus and the disciples. "Who do people say that I am?" They generally saw Jesus as being a beloved, nostalgic character. Someone they could look to for comfort. But when Jesus presses the issue, it is obvious that more is expected of those who truly follow him than just seeking comfort. "If any want to become my follower, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

The Eucharistic Prayer we are currently using says it beautifully. In the second to the last paragraph, we hear these words: "Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal" (BCP, 372). As those who profess to be Christians, we don't just come to Christ for comfort. We come to him to be strengthened so that we can go out and do something about the suffering in the world; to provide comfort to those who are hurting and in need of God's love. As those who profess to be Christians, we don't just come seeking forgiveness for the ways we have failed to live according to God's laws. We come to be energized and renewed in our commitment to go back out into the world to be Christ's hands and heart in tangible ways. To be strengthened and renewed to take up our cross, to engage in the work Christ has given us to do. Or, as the Eucharistic Prayer puts it: "Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we

may worthily serve the world in his name” (BCP, 372). Further reinforcing that being a Christian is about going out and serving as Christ served. That is our identity. That is what defines who we are and what we do. That is the life, the identity, that Christ calls his followers into.

There is so much in our lives and in the world around us that shape who we are, that informs how we define ourselves. Some of those things—many of those things—are the result of events and experiences beyond our control. Such as the tragic events of 9/11. But some of them are fully within our control. We have a choice as to how we respond. We have a choice on how we define ourselves. What it means to be a Christian is one of those things that is completely within our control. Or rather, how we choose to live into and to live out of our identity as Christian is within our control. In our Gospel, Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” This side of the Resurrection, perhaps the better question that Jesus could ask of each of us is, “Who do you say that you are?”