

Pastor Jon's sermon from Sunday, September 12, 2021

“Where do you draw your identity from?”

Text: Mark 8:27-38

Who do people say that I am? Jesus asks this question of his students in our Gospel for today. He wants to know what's the word on the street about me? Then he asks his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?”

What's the word on the street about you? Who do people say that you are? Have you thought about that lately? With the pandemic, we have had to lay low. But still, we are constantly revealing who we are by our words and actions. Some of it is good and some not so good. I know my neighbors associate me with the Creeping Charlie in my yard. They have even offered to give me the name of a good yard sprayer. I told them straight up I am not interested in spraying anything on my yard... for many reasons. He said, “That's what I like about you pastors, you don't beat around the bush.”

Up to this point in the Gospel, Jesus has revealed a lot about himself. He is a healer, a feeder, a welcomer, a storm calmer, a prophet, an antagonist to religious leaders, a teacher, and now we find out... the Messiah. Christos in Greek. Jesus Christ means Jesus the Messiah.

Being relatively new to Neenah... two years... I don't know all of you well unless I have walked with you in a significant life event or have spent time with you in classes or in your homes. Lately I have been learning all too often about our saints at their funerals or memorials when family or friends share stories. I learned this week that Connie Buksyk, whose memorial is this Thursday here at church, was a mother figure to a lot of kids in our community at the roller rink for 37 years. I heard stories of her and her husband David having to teach life lessons at the rink like no PDA, no lying or cheating on the corner skate, and welcoming kids from all walks of life... many of whom were at risk.

As you know, life doesn't always go well. We face obstacles or challenges that bring about suffering in our life. Pain. Grief. Sometimes it is self-imposed, and other times it is out of our control.

The goal is to learn and grow from it... and hopefully grow closer to God in the process. But the question comes up: Is God only present in the good times? Or the bad times too... when we suffer?

Today in our lessons, we see a God whose identity isn't just found in the good things or successes in life, but in our suffering as well. When Jesus asks his disciples who do you say that I am? Peter responds, you are the Christ, the Messiah. Jesus, then sternly ordered Peter and the others to keep quiet as it wasn't Jesus time yet to fully reveal who he was. In those days people were expecting a savior to come in with power and military might and kick out the Romans. This wasn't Jesus.

Instead, Jesus turns around and says all this stuff about that he will undergo great suffering, be rejected by the religious leaders, die, and rise again after three days. Peter then rebukes Jesus about all this crazy talk about suffering and death. Can you blame him? He has one picture in his mind about the Messiah and Jesus another... who claims the servant songs in like in our First reading from Isaiah 50. Jesus was a teacher who was rejected, beaten, spit at, and mocked. Plus, we humans don't do so well talking about death and suffering.

Then Jesus rebukes Peter and says "Get behind me Satan. You are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things." Isn't this just like us. Jesus names Peter the enemy "Satan". Satan, the adversary or tempter, tempts us to set our minds on human things, like money, success, power, looks, possessions, etc... anything that tries to draw your trust away from the one true God.

Then Jesus turns to the crowds, and to us, and says, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow me."

How good are you at denying yourself? We want things our way right away. Right? Look how much debt we accumulate as a society. We often don't deny ourselves. Then take up your cross. What does that mean to pick up a Roman symbol of death and shame? And to follow Jesus is an action verb. It isn't just words. It is a physical act. In the process of denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following Jesus... He promises that you will gain your life.

In a few chapters in Mark, Jesus did go to the cross. His true identity and Messiahship are revealed on the cross. Mark calls this good news. Just think, when things go sideways in life, we have a God who journeys with us in our suffering. God does not abandon us when we suffer but is most present.

When you think about your own identity as a Christian, it's not in human things that moth and rust can destroy. We have this thing called our baptismal identity. It is where we are adopted in Christ Jesus, sealed with the Holy Spirit, and marked with the cross of Christ forever. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Neither death nor life. Also, we are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. So when you fail, when life seems lost, or when you mess up and it feels like death, you can yell out with Luther when he struggled and said "I am baptized." As Christians there is always resurrection hope.

Amen.