

The Rev. Wayne Nicholson
St. John's Episcopal Church, Mt. Pleasant, MI
Sunday, September 13th, 2009
Pentecost 15, Proper 19B

Mark 8:27-38

Who do you say that you are?

Who do I say that I am?

Who do we say that we are?

I think a lot about the identity of St. John's, the vision of St. John's, and how my own identity and vision of myself as priest mesh with the self-proclaimed character of St. John's Episcopal Church in Mount Pleasant, Michigan.

And one of the items I've reflected upon is the sermon I gave my first Sunday with you three years ago this week. I want to look back on part of that message to remind us all of who we say we are and who we truly are. I want to remind you of who you said you are, give you some hints about who I said I am, and offer some thoughts about who we are and who we are becoming.

With apologies to the writer of the Gospel of Mark, I'm going to deviate a bit from today's lesson and go to a more personal, immediate level.

In the Parish Profile prospective Rectors received from you over three years ago (can it have been that long ago?!?), we were told that "St. John's Episcopal Church, with God's help and in the Anglican tradition, lives to proclaim the Gospel of Christ by ministering through worship, outreach, fellowship, and education."

Well, there's nothing wrong with that, but one would hope that *all* Christian churches would have the same mission.

What I found exciting, though, was that the Mission Statement continues, "We welcome all who enter our doors..."

Again – one would hope that all Christian churches would do the same, but you and I know that some do not.

In the Episcopal-slash-Anglican tradition, St. John's intentionally expresses the radical welcome of Jesus – the Jesus who forgave sinners, the Jesus who dined with a tax collector, the Jesus who welcomed the stranger, and the great tradition of one of our founders, a *woman*, the great Queen Elizabeth I, who said pretty much that she did not want to make a window into men's souls as long as you worship from the Book of Common Prayer.

We don't ask for documentation when you walk in, we don't ask if you're baptized or confirmed, we don't ask what your political persuasion is, and we don't ask you if you're born again.

All – the traditionalist, the cradle Episcopalian, those who have “swum the Channel” toward Canterbury from another tradition, the seeker... the liberal, the progressive, the conservative...

All are welcome in this house of God.

The Mission Statement continues, “...we support the diverse callings of each member as we seek to serve Christ in every person.”

We support one another – that's what it means to be in communion.

We encourage thought, we encourage reflection, we even encourage questions!

As we seek the heart of Christ in the heart of the Other, we urge you to *think* – we don't ask you to check your brain at the door.

The Mission Statement expresses support for the many ministries of God's people – from the Altar Guild to the nursery school head, to those who garden and those who clean, to the Vestry and Search Committee, the Evangelism Committee, our amazing musicians, and people who faithfully attend (*or not*) and hold this parish in prayer.

The Catechism of the Book of Common Prayer reminds us that “The ministers of the Church are lay persons, bishops, priests, and deacons”¹ -- *note*, if you will, which group of ministers is mentioned *first*!

This is a parish that recognizes, acknowledges, and honors the many ministries of those who walk through the doors – your ministries, the ministries of the deacons who have served, the ministries of the many priests you have celebrated with over the past years, the ministry of our bishop, and, now, my own particular ministry.

So... Who do you say you are?

You are people who proclaim the Gospel of Christ.

You are Episcopalians and seekers who welcome all. You are a parish that seeks the face of Christ in the Other,

and you are a congregation that values the many gifts and ministries of one another.

And now... Who do I say that I am?

Remember, I’m a former Methodist who came to the Episcopal Church via the Eucharist – when I first attended Church of Our Saviour, Mill Valley, California, where my aunt and uncle are active parishioners, it was a “Eucharist Sunday” – some of you remember those.

And I was held transfixed as the priest said the prayer of Thanksgiving, held the full chalice, and broke the bread for all to share.

“Ah – *this* is what it’s supposed to be,” I thought. The communion of the living and the communion of saints, a horizontal communion, if you will, with one another, a vertical communion with the transcendent and immanent God.

¹ Book of Common Prayer, p. 855

It was the Eucharist that brought me to our denomination within the Catholic faith, and it is the Eucharist that forms the center of every part of my ministry.

It is the Eucharist that restores, refreshes, and renews our common life together and it is *from* the Eucharist that we go forth into the world proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We come to the Table – *that table over there* – in our diverse, common, agreeable, and conflicted ways – and we pull back together the fractured Body of Christ.

In being made whole we are made stronger – a people healed and restored, ready to see the essence of Christ in all humankind and ready to minister to the Christ that is in all.

I'm what is called a "late vocation" – I was fifty-one when I entered The General Theological Seminary, and fifty-three when I was ordained deacon, and fifty-four when I was ordained priest.

And I cannot imagine doing anything else.

I'm a growing priest. Or at least I hope so!

Many of you know that I served a smaller parish in upstate New York.

Fresh out of seminary, I was stretched and pulled and grown – sometimes left alone like a weed out of control, sometimes kneaded like the dough of a good bread.

I'm still realizing what I've learned – and I don't mean to stop learning.

You will continue to grow this priest and we will continue to grow together.

The Vision Statement of this parish says, "St. John's, with the help of the Holy Spirit, will be a dynamic fellowship of Christian worshipers seeking greater understanding of faith and service through programs of spiritual growth, education, and the arts."

In this simple yet complex vision, we seek the guidance of God.

We know we cannot become a dynamic fellowship of Christian worshipers without the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is the Holy Spirit that will nudge us toward new ways of thinking, new ways of living, new ways of being church – ways that will attract the newcomer, ways that will stimulate the old-timer, ways that will honor the Christ we serve.

Frederick Buechner said, “Vocation is that place where the world’s great gladness meets God’s great need.”

We see a broken, troubled, diseased world.

A world of hunger and oppression, a world of tyranny and fanaticism, a world that yearns to be a better place.

God is in great need of our hearts and hands.

And to serve God in Christ Jesus, to take up the cross of joyful sacrifice, brings us to our Christian vocation, where we meet the need of God and the joy of our own stewardship.

That’s where you and I come together.

Together we can internalize our Vision and then act. Together we can go into the world rejoicing and getting our hands dirty. Together we can pray for the poor and gain strength in our Communion. Together we can proclaim the Good News of God’s magnificent love – together we can make a difference.

By the grace of God we are already becoming the dynamic fellowship that was once a vision.

By the grace of God we are responding to people in need.

And by the grace of God we will do this together.

I am profoundly grateful to be with you. What a joy it is to celebrate with you – and what an exciting Vision we have.

By God's grace we've already started.

Amen.