

"Who Are You?"

Romans 12:1-8 & Matthew 16:13-20

August 24, 2008

Permit me to get right to the heart of the matter this morning - no cute little stories - no jokes - just a serious question. Who are you? ... Seriously who are you? I know that you think about it frequently even though not in a direct way. I know that you have an answer to the question, even though that answer might be vastly different today that it might have been yesterday or at times in the past. I could look around this room and say that in this context I am husband, grandpa, son, pastor, preacher and maybe many more things. But does that answer the question? Who are you really? It is an important question - the answer that you have come up with shapes your life in many ways. And perhaps while you are thinking about the question you might also consider the related question: 'who do people around you say that you are?' That is probably the more scary question. The fact of the matter is that the people around you have come up with answers to your identity sometimes you know what others think sometimes we get totally consumed by what others think about who we are and we allow all those descriptions to shape who we think we are as well. We do that no matter how clearly we understand that what others believe is not necessarily the truth or even fair. Too often we allow others to define and reshape who we are - or even worse we allow what we think others think about us to define who we are and how we live. So, let me ask you again who are you?

That question plays prominently in today's Gospel text and it comes to play prominently in the life of every Christian as they reflect on Jesus and on their own life. "Who do people say that I am?" Jesus asks His disciples. The disciples have heard a great deal about what people are saying - - John, the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets incredibly interesting answers. All of those answer reveal a hopefulness on the part of the people If they could imagine that Jesus was a prophet, then at least they were open to the fact that God continues to speak to His people. If they were thinking that Elijah had returned, then they were living expectantly and anticipating that the Messiah was coming. If they were thinking that John the Baptism had returned to life after having been recently beheaded by the Emperor, then they believed that the power of Rome was not the ultimate authority and they could continue to put their trust in God. They were good answers - interesting answer - - - wrong answers ... but still very interesting.

Who are you, Jesus? People often ask if Jesus always knew who He was or when He came to understand that He was the Messiah - the Son of God. That too is an interesting question to which I do not have the answer. But clearly, by this point in His ministry, Jesus knew who He was. Very clearly, Jesus had come to understand

not only who He was but what that meant for His life. Who He was shaped His actions, what He said and where He went. It is good to know who you are.

Do you know who you are?

I read a great story about a seminary professor who had stopped with his family at a restaurant in Tennessee. A short time after they were seated, a distinguished looking older man stopped at their table and began to visit and in the midst of the small talk he asked the professor what he did. He said, "I'm a teacher of preachers."

The older man seemed to become even more interested and said that he had a story about preachers he would like us to hear. I think that a lot of people have stories about preachers. He said, "When I grew up, I wasn't very popular, I ate my lunches alone at school, and was teased a lot because I didn't know who my father was. I went to church but always hurried out before the preacher could get to me. One Sunday I stayed longer than intended, and when I tried to leave in a hurry, two big ladies were blocking the aisle. The pastor caught up with me and put his hand on my shoulder. With real caring tone in his voice, he said, 'Son, I don't know you. Let's, see ... you're the child of ...' and then he paused as though trying to come up with the name - - 'Oh, yes, you're the child of ... the child of God. It's great to have you here. Now go out and live who you are.' He paused for a minute and that said, "My name's Ben Hooper. That meeting changed my life. I went from the kid who sat all alone to a guy who served as Governor of Tennessee for two terms."

Does it make a difference if you know who you are? Who are you? Do you get so caught up in what you think people say about who you are that you forget who you really are you children of God?

It makes a difference if you know who you are. And it makes a difference if you know who those around you are as well. Peter looked at Jesus and got it right - it made all the difference in the world. "You are the Christ - the Messiah - the anointed one from God - the Son of the living God. It doesn't matter how hopeful the other answers were. They all fell short of the truth - they fell short of the one answer that would make all of the difference in the world. It is only when we know that He is Savior that it makes any sense to turn our lives over to Him in any way.

Who do you say that Jesus is? And who are you?

A well know and respected pastor named William Willimon told of a student who came to him one day and asked him to explain the difference between Christianity and Judaism. She went on to explain that she was in love with another student who was Jewish. They were both law students, thinking about marriage. She wondered how they would be able to deal with the difficult differences? - - - such questions are always good questions to

struggle with even if the differences are not as stark. As she talked it was clear that the differences she was thinking about had to do with rituals, festivals, and general beliefs. But then she asked the really fundamental question. "When it comes down to it, what is the one thing that makes Christians, Christian?" That gets to the heart of it. The answer is not pot luck-dinners, WWJD bracelets or singing from a red hymnal. The thing that makes Christians who we are is who we say that Jesus is.

Today's gospel text is not just another nice moment in the life of Jesus - not just another fun story. This is the heart and soul of Christianity. It is at the heart of our faith and how we live our lives. It really touches on the core of who we are. Jesus is Savior and we are saved by His loving grace.

Paul wrote a letter to the church in Rome where it was obvious that too many had a very high opinion of themselves. "Do not think more highly of your self that you ought to think - think with sober judgement" he wrote. Good advice, I suspect. But at the same time do not think too little of yourself. You know who you are - children of God - saved by the Messiah, Son of the living God.

Not bad so now let us go out and live it!

AMEN