

September 16, 2012

Scripture Lessons *James 3:1-12*
Mark 8:27-38

Sermon *The Big Question*

Well, it is no surprise to you that it is the season for men for political campaigning and so in a few weeks' voters will go to the polls to make decisive choices about the future leadership of our state and our nation. In the meantime the media will hopefully do it best to provide information and insight about the life and character of each candidate, unfortunately sometimes prompting more questions than answers in our minds. Political ads plus the rumor mill will offer truths, half-truths and anything but the truth about those running. And the polls will repeatedly sample the political climate for each of the candidates and then finally, finally, we, the voters will have to shift through everything we have heard and reach our own conclusions and make our own decisions. And how we sort it all out will impact the life of our state and our nation for some years to come.

If Jesus knew the end of his campaign or as we might call it his ministry there weren't any polls to find out what the people were thinking or saying about him and of course about his ministry. There were no media personalities giving those neat sound bites from his latest sermons or doing in-depth analysis about him or questioning accounts of his birth or probing the lives of those of his closest followers or the people who had been blessed by his miracles. But there was confrontation and there was speculation about who he was and what he came into this world to do. As Jesus was being drawn to Jerusalem in those climatic events of his minister he did ask his disciples a question. "What are you hearing?" "What are people saying about my ministry?" "Who do people say that I am?" You know, what, the feedback wasn't very helpful at all. The disciples recorded. "You got the people's attention but they're not sure about what you are about. Some people think you are John the Baptist who has returned to life. Some of them are saying you are Elijah, the prophet, whose return, our people have been expecting for centuries. Some people just shake their heads and say, he is just one of those old prophets reincarnated. There does no clear understand certainly no consensus among our people at all about who you are. Then Jesus asked the question a lot more personally and pointedly, "But who do you say that I am?" And predictably, unpredictably Peter blurted out the answer. "You are the Messiah. You are the Christ. You are the fulfiller of prophesy, you the one for whom Israel has been waiting for century after century." You know in the last analysis, it really

doesn't make much difference what they say about Jesus but what they say about God. The decisive issue is how we personally answer the question, "Who do you say I am?" Even though Peter didn't have all the answers, he had this answer in a moment of divine intuition he knew that Jesus was the sovereign of his life. He knew at least, he wanted to put God first in his thoughts, prayers and his actions. In the so-called younger churches overseas, it is not uncommon for people to refer to themselves as proudly as specific generation of Christian. So they talk about being a third, fifth or sixth generation Christian in their family. I suppose in their context, that self description might be understandable maybe even helpful. But when you think about it there is no second or third generation of Christians. There is only first generation Christians because faith is not transmitted through the genes or passed on like blue eyes or a tendency toward baldness. Faith is always a kinda of new and personal experience. God's gift through baptism and Christian formation and commitment is to each of us as individuals. The faith of our fathers and mothers is very pretty important but each of us must be able to sing from the heart that old hymn that says, "My faith looks up to Thee." It says my faith to thee. Martin Luther who was baptized the day after his birth, unquestioningly, was brought up in a Christian family nevertheless, went through a deep struggle on his way through to his dynamic faith in which Lutheran helped to change the face of Christianity for centuries and centuries to come. His personal experience of faith was reflected in the way he structured his explanations of the very articles of the Apostles Creed and his catechisms. He wrote the catechism in this way, "I believe that God has created me." "I believe Jesus Christ has redeemed me." "I believe the Holy Spirit has redeemed me." All these things reflect the fact that while Luther believed faith to be a corporate reality involving the whole life of the church, it has, nevertheless, has to strongly personal and strongly experimental to live and grow as a Christian person.

So moving along with the story doesn't it surprise you that Peter could go from the sublime statement to a ridiculous statement in one short step moreover more accurately in five short verses. It was a high moment when Peter answered Jesus' question, "Who do you say I am" with faith and with wisdom. And just moments later Jesus laid out the cost of discipleship in unmistakable terms. Peter in his loving and impulsive tried to talk Jesus out of his journey to Jerusalem; out of his journey to the cross; out of rejection; out of suffering, a fate unbecoming of a messiah in Peter's mind. And then Peter heard himself spoken of, as what? As Satan, the devil, as a destroyer. You know faith is like that, it never comes full grown but always is nurtured and strengthen and sometimes even corrected. Faith is always a growing experience or it is not faith. It would be delightful to go through life with the faith of a child who hears the story of the resurrection the first time and responses with that wide eyed wonder, "Wow! How in the world could

God have done that” but you know you and I need an adult faith living to equip us to live in a world of adult processes and larger than adult problems, anxiety that each of us must face every day. We answer Jesus question “Who do you say I am” and we are called to answer both with our lips and with our lives. Jesus doesn’t paint any pretty pictures of what the life of a follower of Jesus might entail. His terms are very clear in this lesson. If anyone wants to become my follower, let them deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow me. But those who want to save their lives will lose them and those who lose their lives for my sake and the sake of the gospel will save them.

What a question it might be focusing on God and others at the beginning of the 21st century. I wonder what that would look like thinking in terms mostly in these terms of self fulfillment, self actualization and self development... You go for the gusto, because you only go around once in life, like the old beer commercial tells us. But take up your cross and follow Jesus in the 21st century. Focusing on others in this way seems or sounds like a sort of wishy- washy expression. Suggestion that we refuse to pamper ourselves that we abstain from certain luxuries or even necessities maybe only for a brief time of lent. But as one commentator wrote that self-denial means this it means taking up your cross means making a deliberate choice of something could be evaded if you wanted to. To take up a burden which we are under no compulsion to take up except the compulsion of God’s love; taking up your cross means taking upon ourselves the burden of others or the lives of others and putting ourselves without reservation at the service of God whatever the cost.

You know it is strange that people say human nature doesn’t change and that history doesn’t change but it seems in the strange providence of God, the people in the early part of the 21st century might have found a new willingness to deny self and to take up crosses if need be to follow in Jesus’ steps at great cost for themselves and others. Look for example, a few years ago at the outpour of not just sympathy but the actual work in action that came out of the disaster of Katrina Hurricane that hit the New Orleans area and that whole south coast of the United States. But more importantly, think about those little ways that you and I are able to do the same thing for people here at our church and throughout our community. I think about that often when I sit in Mission meetings I see all the things that we are able to do when we set our minds to them here at Newport United Church of Christ. You know when we answer in faith to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am”, answering both by our words and with the example of our lives. We really shouldn’t be surprised if it brings us under the shadow of the cross, after all Jesus said a disciple is not above his or her teacher. We should perhaps be surprised if the journey does not bring us to that cross. We can be confident that cross is not ultimately death but ultimately life; that cross is not despair but that

cross is hope. I hope you will take these words in encouragement and in the light of picking up our crosses and following Jesus and walk with that in this week to come.

And together we say Amen