

August 24, 2014 Sermon Matthew 16:13-20 Romans 12:1-8 "Upon this Rock"

The other day one of our folks was talking about serving and witnessing to Jesus Christ today, and she reminded me that lots of sermons - probably the most powerful ones - are preached without any words. Lots of sermons - usually not by the paid pastor in the pulpit - share the hope and love of our Lord by the way we live.

I think that's part of what Paul had in mind when he wrote to the early Christians in Rome, "Brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:1-2) In other words, let your faith in Jesus make a big difference in the way you go through life.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus asked the disciples, "What's the word on the street? Who are folks saying that I am?"

I wonder how we would respond if Jesus asked US, today, this question? In my imagination, I can imagine myself struggling to answer. "Well, Jesus, a lot of people today don't seem to take time to think much about who you are. Some people think you're just a crutch for needy people, sort of like an imaginary friend for a troubled child. Other people love to talk a lot about you, but in the same breath they seem to delight in pointing out everything wrong with people who are gay or people who are refugees or people who are of a religion other than theirs...So in lots of ways their message ends up making people feel unlovable instead of loved. And then there are folks who call you their Savior and their Lord, and you can just see that they are trying their very best to share your love and hope with other people...They're the ones who make me want to follow and serve you, too."

We could come up with lots of different answers. I guess it depends on how we have experienced the messages of the Christians we have known.

But then comes the really important part. Jesus turned to his disciple, Peter, and asked him, "Who do *you* say that I am?" Each of us is put on the spot to answer the same question for ourselves, every day. What is my life saying about who Jesus is for me?

"Brothers and sisters, present your bodies – your daily lives - as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God..." We either do, or we don't. Every day, it's our choice.

It's one thing to recite a Creed, even if we know it from memory. It's quite another to *know* that Jesus is your Rock, your Help and Strength through whatever comes; and to commit your life to follow him. Even more, to let your very own life be a living sacrifice to God, where you refuse to be conformed to the ways of the world. This means that if somebody hits you or cheats you or cuts you off or steals your money or hurts somebody you love, you choose not

do what is reasonable as a way of this world and hit them back or cheat them even more or sue them or somehow get even. Instead, as living sacrifice to God you try to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, even allowing yourself to appear foolish as you offer love, forgiveness and help right at the place that retaliation is expected. A living sacrifice.

Some thirty year-olds I have talked with lately don't seem to see any real use for church. They see church as for the most part ineffectual, perhaps okay for folks who want to get together to remember what they had as they were growing up, but little more. When I hear this, I realize that the modern mainline churches in the United States have too often done a pretty pathetic job of witnessing. We go to worship, we hope it won't run over an hour, then we go back to our normal routines. There is little personal risk for us to be Christian; our faith is not all that costly.

When Woody and I lived in New Haven in the early 1980's, the Green there was a vibrant space with all kinds of people speaking and speaking out on it. One day there was a young woman who was trying to get people to sign some sort of petition. "Excuse me," she said, could I have a moment of your time? I need your support, would you be willing to sign my petition?" "What will it cost me?" a man asked. "Nothing," she replied, "It won't cost you a thing." "If it does not cost anything, then it is of no value, then it cannot mean anything, so what's the point of my signing it?" And with that he walked away.

Back when Peter declared his belief that Jesus was the Messiah, it was risky. The Romans were in power and the Jewish authorities did not want anything to upset their fairly comfortable existence. With Jesus, nobody knew what would happen next, but they did know that *something was happening*. People's lives were being changed: fishermen and a tax collector had dumped their professions! Sick people were being made well! Untouchables were being lifted up to new life. And those who thought they knew it all when it came to how God worked were totally upset and dead wrong. Risky, lively, life-changing stuff!

William Willimon tells of a friend from college who became an expert in east-west relationships back in the 1980's, work for a large corporation that was negotiating contracts with the Soviet Union. At a lunch one day in Moscow his Russian counterpart said, "I am an atheist, I make decisions based on the idea that the material world is all there is. I do not believe there is anything more than what we see here in this world. You are a Christian, so you look at life differently than that. But we seem to work together with no problem. So tell me, how does being a Christian make a difference in the way you look at business, or in the way you vote, the way you spend your money? How are you different from me?" The man said that he was stumped by the question because while he had always considered himself to be a Christian, he had never thought about it in those terms. So he sought out his old friend from college, then chaplain at Duke University, and said to him, "How do I find a faith that matters, that makes a difference in who I am? How do I get a faith that costs something, that demands something of me?" (William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, vol. 42, No. 3)

“Upon you, Simon-now-called-Peter (which means ROCK), I am going to build my church... And Hell will have no power against it, and this church’s power will sway heaven...” That’s what Jesus declared after Peter uttered his confession. Not a meek, weak, unable-to-speak church, but one filled with power as its members offered their lives as a living sacrifice, a real offering to God. A relationship with Jesus is costly, because life with Jesus must be different!

This morning’s Call to Worship tells us God’s yearning: “What does the Lord want, but for us to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.”(Micah 6:8) Every day, we decide whether or not we will try to do so.

Who are *we* saying that Jesus is? What are our lives (our words, our reactions, our decisions) telling others about our Lord?

“Do not be conformed to the ways of this world, but be transformed as you present your bodies and your lives as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” May our lives so share the love of God that someone else will find reason to believe. Amen.