

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH – Scripture & Sermon
Sunday August 23, 2020 ~ 12th Sunday after Pentecost

WORSHIP FOCUS: “Identity”

In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity. - *Erik Erikson*

1st LESSON: Romans 12:1-8 (NRSV)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to 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. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

2nd LESSON: Matthew 16:13-20 (NRSV)

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

REFLECTION: “I See You, You See Me”

At the centre of the Gospel story, and, at the centre of our faith as Christians, lies one simple question, the question that Jesus asks his followers in each synoptic gospel, and the question that Jesus asks us today: “Who do you say that I am?”

And yet, this is a question that many of us have not asked ourselves. This week, for instance, when I asked someone in my family what she would say if Jesus were to ask her: “Who do you say that I am,” she laughed, looked at me like I was crazy, and then, clearly never really having thought about the question, sheepishly said to me, “Well, I guess he was a fisherman.”

How would you answer the question? Who do you know Jesus to be?

The words of our disciples in our reading today suggest that there was a wide range of opinion about who Jesus was in his own time. They reply to Jesus, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

But it is Peter who seems to have best answered the question in our reading for today. When Peter says to Jesus, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” Jesus is pleased. He tells Peter that because of his understanding, Peter will become the rock on which the church is built.

There is a temptation in Peter’s reply. Since Peter appears to have answered properly and received Jesus’ approval, many of us might be tempted to give Peter’s answer to get that approval. We might, for instance, memorize Peter’s answer, like a Sunday school lesson, saving it up, ready to repeat as the need arises.

And yet, Jesus is not interested in what other people think about him. In our reading today, he first asks, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And this is when the disciples chip in. But what other people say does not interest Jesus. The question narrows, “Who do you say that I am?”

If we are to answer Jesus’ question with Peter’s answer, won’t we just be saying precisely what Jesus does not want us to say? Won’t we just be saying what another person said, what Peter said, parroting back Peter’s understanding of Jesus?

I believe that Jesus wants us to answer this question ourselves. “Who do you – each one of us here today – say that I am?”

As Christians, how you answer this question is vitally important. A few times during my life I have met very spiritual, evangelical type people who have sat me down and asked me whether I know Jesus. The people who have this discussion with me are not crazy. Their agenda has never been coercive or manipulative. They have always been warm and open, and curious. But they have asked me anxiously, and it has always been immediately apparent to me that their primary motivation has been love.

When I have told them that I know Jesus, they then press gently, and ask me to go deeper. They want to know who Jesus is to me. And when I do this, they smile, and perhaps give my hand a reassuring squeeze. Not one of these people has ever corrected me. Not one of these people has ever told me that my answer was wrong.

And yet, one woman did conclude our conversation with the question: “Is that all?”

I remember that I said: “Yes.”

And I remember her response to me: “Well, that’s a start. You will get to know him better as the years go by.”

I was not sure what she meant at the time. But today, I have to confess that she was correct. The Jesus of my youth is a lot simpler than the Jesus of my middle age. Jesus and I have gotten closer with age. I have revealed more of myself to Jesus, and Jesus has revealed more of himself to me.

If that nice evangelical lady had sat me down and asked me today: “Do you know Jesus?”; if Jesus asked me today: “Who do you say that I am?”; I would have much more to say today than I did back then.

Jesus asks each of us: “Who do you say that I am?”

There is something on the surface of Jesus' question that is a little unsettling. There is a part of us that when we read the Gospel accounts of Jesus, whenever he asks this question, that is a little odd. Shouldn't Jesus know who he is, a part of each of us wonders? Shouldn't we all know who we are?

And yet, at the root of Jesus' question, I believe that something deep and mysterious is going on. I believe that Jesus asks this question because he hungers for a relationship with each of us. And, at the root of a healthy relationship, there lies so much that involves identity: a need to be seen, a need to be appreciated, a need for feedback, a need to be loved and respected. A need to know who we are is in relationship to those we love; that deep human need that Erik Erikson speaks of when he wrote: "In the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity."

Relationships with others take us out of the jungle of human existence. Relationships allow us to construct identities. Indeed, our identities are largely determined by the type and quality of our relationships. And, our identities – especially when they are healthy – allow us to live and achieve and build.

If we can see Jesus and Jesus can see us – if we can forge a healthy identity – in that relationship, then we allow and give permission for everything that Jesus and ourselves can be together to take place. Salvation, redemption, justification – whatever we choose to call it, friendship maybe? – can take place.

Think about it. In your own relationships with others – especially those who are close to you – we all recognize a deep need to have the other tell us what they think about us, how they feel about us, how they see us. And when we hear their loving words that tell us we have been noticed, and seen, and then told who the other understands us to be – then something unfolds – trust, confidence, ease, and energy, love.

In my life, for instance, especially when I was young, I had a very difficult time telling people I loved how much I loved them. I saw them, but I was unable to tell them that I could see them. And the relationships fizzled out. They guttered like a candle.

"You keep your good things to yourself," I remember a good friend telling me as our relationship died.

And so, I had to start to practise giving people feedback, daring to say who I understood my beloved to be. And it was hard. I had to start taking risks.

And yet, in telling people who I saw them to be, and in listening to how they saw me, my relationships deepened.

I think the same happens to Jesus, and to us, when we enter into that same type of dialogue with Jesus.

Who do you say that I am?

Biblical scholars such as Walter Brueggemann, talk about how all God really wants is a relationship with his people. They talk about the way that our Bibles show the many instances that God's people turn away from this relationship and yet, how God continues to reach out and seek the very thing that is denied him. And some theologians even go so far as to say that God became human, as a last ditch attempt to enter into relationship with his beloved.

Jesus is God, humiliated, recognizing his need for relationship, and desperately seeking that love. He just wants to be seen. He just wants you to know that he see you.

The Church that is founded on Peter is founded on relationship, the authentic relationship that Peter had with Jesus, on Peter's authentic, individual understanding of who Jesus was. But it is also founded on the result of, who Peter seeing Jesus, Jesus saw Peter to be the rock.

The church that Paul talks about in our reading today, in which individual members are renewed and surprized by spiritual gifts they did not know they even had, is based on relationship. The gifts – the new identities that these gifts bestow on each of us – teacher, exhorter, giver, leader, caregiver – are all part of the identities we discover in relationship with Jesus.

“Who do you say that I am,” says the Lord.

The answer will be as unique as you are. It will depend on your situation. It will not necessarily be the same answer as it was yesterday.

And yet it will be true. Maybe start your relationship there today. And be prepared to meet a Jesus who surprises you. And perhaps, meet a you who surprises you equally.