

Proper 16 Year A

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The Rev. Dr. Robert Honeychurch, Interim Rector

It's good to be back here at All Saints, after a few days away visiting the land of my birth. A week ago today I was worshipping at the Episcopal church camp along the shore of Flathead Lake in northwestern Montana during "Alumni Weekend", seated in their outdoor chapel looking out over the lake, singing camp songs, wearing shorts and a t-shirt and tennis shoes, with the birds chattering in the trees above and a soft breeze blowing through my hair. But while I was there, my mind drifted back to this place. And while the settings for our respective worship services last Sunday were so very different, I was also reminded of the ties which bind us together – ties which transcend buildings or prayer books or musical styles or dress codes... ties which are rooted in a love for God, and of a deep sense of the presence of God in our lives, and of the joy of being together. And so, while I was glad to be gone last Sunday, I am glad, as well, to be together with you all today.

I was one of those kids who was a church camp junkie. The first time I set foot on the property of the camp where I worshiped last Sunday was way back in the summer of 1969. I was a camper there for five summers, followed by six more years working on the camp staff, followed by a few more stints as the chaplain of the week once I was ordained and working as a priest in Montana. Truth be told, I guess I still am a bit of a church camp junkie even today.

All of which... reminds me of a joke...

The story is told of a young boy who went off one summer to Bible Camp. Now this wasn't your typical Episcopal-type camp, where you spend your time frolicking in the mountains or lakes, doing simple little crafts projects to bring home, and once in a while even talking about God in the process. No, this was more like Bible Boot Camp, where the whole point of going to camp was to learn the Bible. It really was more like indoctrination camp for young Bible proof-texters – you know the type, they are those scary people you sometimes hear on radio or late-night television on the cable channels – where the challenge was always to come up with some scripture passage to meet every situation.

So, for instance, if you felt that you weren't being treated fairly on the soccer field, somebody might come up to you, shrug their shoulders, and say, "Matthew 5:45 – God makes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good." – or, in other words, "Tough luck, get over it." Or, if you were sitting in Bible class, and that cute little girl keeps interrupting you while you're trying to talk, you might turn to her, shake your finger and say, "Proverbs 9:13 – A foolish woman is noisy; she is wanton and knows no shame." Or, if you've gone all week in the same pair of jeans and t-shirt, and you're starting to smell like an over-ripe piece of fruit, your counselor might take you aside and gently say to you, "Revelation 22:14 – Blessed are those who wash their robes."

Well, as luck would have it, this camp was known as a great place to learn the Bible, but exactly as a four-star dining experience, if you know what I mean. So, every morning the kitchen staff would put out the same thing, a huge pot of overcooked oatmeal that, by the time the kids came to breakfast after their extended morning devotions, not only was it overcooked, but it was also cold as a stone. And this little kid hated oatmeal. But there was nothing he could do about

it... until, one day he found the perfect Bible passage. At breakfast the next morning, he was sure to be at the front of the line, so that as they came in for their breakfast, he stood up on a chair, gathered everyone's attention, and announced, "Oatmeal... Hebrews 13:8 – Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever."

"Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever." As the punchline for a joke, it is one of those classic lines which just seems to stick in everybody's heads. As a statement of faith, on the other hand, it is a line which has probably caused as much conflict and confusion for some people over the years as it has brought comfort and compassion for others.

In this morning's gospel lesson, we hear Jesus in the midst of a conversation with his disciples as they are traveling through the region of Caesarea Philippi. Now, this particular part of the world in Jesus' time, while only about 100 miles from Jerusalem, was about as far as Jesus ever strayed from home in his entire life. It was, for him, the end of the known world, a world far different from the one in which he was born and raised and lived all of his life. Just like life here in the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, the farther you stray from the Holy City, the less influence the powers-that-be have over the local inhabitants. So, by the time one got as far out as Caesarea Philippi back in Jesus' time, Judaism no longer held sway. In fact, there was no "dominant" religion, but rather a hodge-podge of religious expressions which served a variety of needs and wants.

So it was in that mostly non-Jewish context that Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" "What's the word on the street about who I am, and what I'm all about?" And the disciples responded with a whole variety of answers: "Some say that you're John the Baptist, some say Elijah, still

others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” And then Jesus remarks, “But who do you say that I am?” Of course, it’s Peter, the tempestuous one – the fast talking, fast-acting (but often slow-thinking) one – who comes back with the first answer: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Those two questions – “Who do people say that I am?” and “Who do you say that I am?” – lie at the heart of Christian theology, at the heart of our quest for a deeper understanding of God. Both questions are important, because the first one speaks to our common understanding of God, while the second one asks for a particularly personal understanding of how God is at work in my life.

There have been any number of efforts afoot over the years to come to a deeper understanding – a common understanding – of who was the “real Jesus.” One of the most notable efforts in the recent past was the Jesus Seminar, a gathering of some of the most astute biblical scholars in the 1980’s and 90’s, who came together to identify what they collectively believed to be the “genuine” words of Jesus as found in the gospels. Using a rather convoluted ranking system involving different colored beads, they rated each quotation of Jesus as to the level of certainty they could place on the authenticity of the passage as being the actual words of Jesus... and not simply a saying ascribed to him by some future gospel writer. While their efforts were appreciated by some, and criticized by others, it really was a good-faith effort to answer the question of who was the “historical Jesus”, to address the notion, “Who do people say that I am?”

However important it is, though, to have a common understanding of Jesus, each of us also must have a personal understanding as well. There is nothing the Jesus Seminar can say or do, there is nothing I can say or do, there is nothing

anyone else can say or do, to tell you who God is to be for you, or how God is at work in your life. Peter's response to Jesus' question in this morning's gospel, "Who do you say that I am?" emerged not out of some scholarly discussion Peter had been having with the other disciples, nor from some great homily he heard once in his local synagogue, nor from a literature review of recently published first-century treatises on the nature of the divine. Peter's response grew out of his own encounter with Jesus, his own experience of having Jesus touch his heart, his own sense of how Jesus was active in his daily life. "For me, Peter, you are the Messiah" was Peter's own confession of faith, as he stood face-to-face with Jesus, and offered his testimony as to how Jesus had transformed his life.

All of which brings us back around to that quotation from Hebrews 13:8 – "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever." You see, at least as I understand that phrase on face value, I'm not sure I believe it. My answer to Jesus' question, "But who do you say that I am?" will necessarily be different from your answer to that same question. And I can tell you, my answer to that question is considerably different than it was 10 or 20 or 30 or 40 or 50 years ago. In my own life, has Jesus been the same yesterday, today, and forever? Certainly not. As I have grown in my prayer life, in my faith life, in my common life with other people, I have experienced God growing as well. As I have changed and developed, I have felt God changing and developing alongside and within me every step of the way. As my life situation has taken new twists and turns, I have sensed God working in new and unexpected ways all along the journey.

How would you respond to those two questions Jesus put before his disciples if they were being asked of you? Well, first, you have to believe that you are indeed being asked to answer them. Those aren't questions reserved for clergy,

or seminary types, or professional church-goers. Those are questions being asked of each one of us each day... each one of us today... each one of us right now.

How do you develop a response to Jesus' first question: "Who do people say that I am?" Well, I'd suggest that you go find out. Ask your neighbor, ask your spouse, ask your kids or grandkids. Say to them, "Tell me about God." Ask a Mormon. Ask a Roman Catholic. Ask a Seventh Day Adventist. Ask somebody who doesn't go to church. They'll have an answer. And you may be surprised by what you learn. What else can you do? Join a Bible study. Start a Bible study. Read the newspaper and look for God at work in the world. The answers are out there, if only you believe you are being asked the question.

And then there's that second question: "Who do you say that I am?" Other people can tell you their stories, their encounters with God, but ultimately you have to answer this question for yourself... and in a way that nobody else gets to answer. Who do you say that Jesus is... in your life... in your experience... in the deepest parts of your own heart? To answer this question, I would suggest, using the language of Alcoholics Anonymous, that you take a "fearless moral inventory". Search your own heart and soul, and look for those places where you have allowed – and even more importantly, where you have denied – God access to your inmost parts. Do you remember that old painting entitled *I Stand at the Door and Knock*, with Jesus waiting patiently outside the door of a house? If you look closely at that old classic work of religious art, you will discover that the door at which Jesus stands has no doorknob on the outside. The door can only be opened from within. You know where that door leads in your life. Open it up, allow God to enter in, and you will find a new answer to that age-old question, "Who do you say that I am?"

This is the work of faith. This is the work of being a Christian. It is not easy work. But it is absolutely essential if we are to grow into the people God is calling us to become. This morning, Peter took a chance, and shot off his mouth once again. And in return, God blessed him. So take a chance yourself this morning. Answer the question... and be prepared to receive God's gift in your life. "Blessed are you, and on this rock I will build my church."

Amen.