

Who Are You?

Last week the question that Jesus posed to all of us was “Who am I?”

And last week, Peter got it exactly right.

Or, at least he got the name exactly right.

He recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.

But while he got the name right, he didn't understand the consequences of that name.

Today, Jesus spells out those consequences, and it's startling and distressing.

Rather than a king who rides into town with his army and military might, Jesus explains to them that the Messiah, and therefore, his followers, take on a life of service, healing, and love.

The very things that most people in the world call naïve — or simply ridiculous.

And with that explanation, Jesus turns to us and asks, “Who are you?”

Jesus knows full well that our default position is typically one of being self-absorbed and frightened of risk.

And in the face of that default position, Jesus opens a door into a way of life of stunning depth, of sublime beauty, inviting us into the most serene peace ever imagined.

We simply need to be willing to let go.

To let be.

To surrender to the flow of things.

In other words, Jesus asks us to wrestle with one of the most persistent questions that gets asked in every generation:

"How are we to live out our faith?"

It's a question all of our churches struggle with.

And it's at the root of the two-part gospel lesson we finished this morning; with last week's reading being Part One.

How are we to live out our faith?

It's a question that's arriving front and center here in our own parish as we move into this time of transition.

If our human default position is to be self-absorbed and afraid of risk, our institutional church default position is to turn our parishes into white, middle class suburban enclaves.

Which has a lot of practical implications.

Those churches hire outside help to maintain the grounds and buildings.

We cultivate our members, both church and community members, to do those things.

Those churches tend to isolate their services to the poor and needy to so-called "social work" professionals.

Think Catholic Charities.

But our social outreach has nothing to do with social work.

Rather, the outreach we provide is a direct response to the many annual church conventions we have had in which our Bishop implored all of the diocese to live out the great challenge of Matthew 25: feed the poor, clothe the naked, comfort the sick.

It's not social work that we're doing, it's gospel work.

It's why our friend Charles Steffey could reclaim his life here, and in the reclaiming, gifting us with his many skills in keeping this elderly lady of a church in good repair.

It's why the many volunteers who walk this campus every day show up, month after month, year after year.

They are not social workers, they are gospel workers!

The community that has come into being here constantly asks what it really means to follow the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.

It means that there are no lines between people.

It means that God has no favorites — because everybody is God's favorite.

It means all of life is swept up in God — so there is no part of life that our faith does not touch.

And when it comes to judging each other?

Let's not!

That's what got everyone in trouble in the first place, when our first mother and father ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil!

We're not equipped to know the difference between good and evil, and we almost always mess it up every time we try.

It's why God appoints Jesus as the sole judge, because he lets wheat and chaff grow together.

He hauls in good fish and bad fish, because truth be told, the line between good and evil doesn't run between "us and them," it runs through the heart of every person, and every social system.

To follow the Living God means — serving each other.

It means — forgiving each other.

It means — giving up our life for each other.

There's no Cadillacs, no mansions, no cash in the bank on this path.

But there is fellowship and compassion and beauty beyond our wildest dreams.

After all, what Cadillac compares to a sunrise?

What mansion holds a candle to a meadow filled with spring flowers?

How much money is a lung full of fresh air worth?

But there is this too.

We will have beauty — and we will have pain also.

This is the way of Jesus.

And if we choose to follow him, it becomes our way too.

It's the way of giving up.

Of letting go.

It's the way of trust.

The life of faith isn't made up of insiders who have all they need.

The life of faith is about reaching out to everyone in this world, secure in the knowledge that the Creator of all things, is present in all things.

That "truth" doesn't belong to any one group or club, but that everyone can be a channel for truth, beauty, and compassion.

And because of that, we are invited into a life of freedom that is hard to imagine.

The freedom to lose ourselves in service to one another.

The freedom to forgive, rather than to hate.

The freedom to embrace, rather than reject.

The freedom to risk illness or poverty or even death, all because, no matter our doubts, no matter our fears, no matter our best thinking, our hope is in the crucified one; the one whom death could not defeat.

As one priest says:

“The deep secret of Jesus’ hard words to us in this passage is that our fear of suffering and death — robs us of life.

Because fear of death always turns into fear of life.

It’s a stingy, cautious way of living — which is not really living at all.

The deep secret of Jesus’ hard words is that the way to have abundant life isn’t to save it — but to spend it!

To give it away!

Because life cannot be shut up and saved.

Any more than a bird can be put in a shoebox and stored on the closet shelf.” B.B. Taylor, *The Seeds of Heaven*, 79.

And this of course is the constant struggle that we endure throughout our lives.

Moving from what we instinctively reach for, as the disciples did last week, when it comes to our obsessions with controlling people, places and things, and to surrender all of that so that we may sit at the feet of the Living God.

The God who is completely different from what we expect.

Who accepts the unacceptable.

Who loves the unlovable.

We gather here each Sunday in order to remember our common story.

And yet, there is another, more fundamental reason, why we find ourselves here week after week.

We come together every Sunday so that we can find encouragement to follow this strange way of Jesus.

We come to learn to spot, and decline, those temptations to follow the easier way.

The way of "us against them."

The way of judgment and condemnation and hate.

The devil's way indeed.

Don't feel bad if this way of Jesus takes a lifetime to wrap our arms around.

If men as great as St. Peter and St. Paul can struggle with these things throughout their whole lives, so shall we.

And so, beloved, how shall we live out our faith?

How shall we answer the question Jesus poses today: "Who are you?"

Perhaps by heeding the wisdom of Paul.

That we become a people who:

“rejoice in hope.

Are patient in suffering.

Who persevere in prayer.

That in genuine love, we hold fast to what is good.

That we love one another.”

When our faith is lived in this way, we know who we are.

Beloved children of the ever faithful God.

+amen .