

Sermon September 13, 2009 – Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

The Very Rev'd Dr. Philip C. Linder

Mark 8:27-38

“Lord, take my lips and speak through them; take my mind and think through it; take my heart and set it on fire for your Holy Gospel.” +Amen.

When we first came to Trinity Cathedral my son Conrad was in the eighth grade and very quickly became active in our acolyte program. I think it was our second year here that one Sunday afternoon, Conrad said to me, “You know all of the acolytes are afraid of you.” I was stunned and asked him how could they be afraid of me? Without pausing a moment he answered, “Wouldn't you...be afraid of you?”

What I really think my son was pointing to was the desire of the acolytes to do everything in the liturgy well and please all of the clergy. The desire of all of us to please others in life is a quite natural part of what it means to be human. So listen again to this morning's Collect for the 15th Sunday after Pentecost: *O God, because without you we are not able to please you, mercifully grant that your Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts...* This prayer that opened this morning's liturgy points to the obvious truth that we cannot please someone with whom we have no relationship—we cannot please God if our relationship with God is weak, perfunctory, or even non-existent. If we are to please God then we must be intentional about this relationship, a relationship that must always come first in our lives, before any other.

The lesson before us from Mark's Gospel is one of the great passages written about Jesus' life and ministry. We cannot imagine that Jesus' question to Peter and the disciples, *Who do people say that I am*, has anything to do with his concern for what people think about him. Rather this question is both messianic and human—Jesus on the one hand is the Christ asking the disciples if they comprehend who he is, and, on the other hand it is a beautifully human question where we perhaps catch a glimpse of Jesus struggling with his call and identity before God.

We see Jesus traveling with his disciples toward the villages of Caesarea Philippi. This journey takes place following the miracles of the loaves and fishes, and the healing of the blind man. And it is an incredibly pivotal moment in the ministry of Jesus, as it is the event where the apostle Peter confesses Jesus to be the anointed one—in Greek, it is translated, “You are The Christ,” and in Hebrew, “You are The Messiah.” Jesus then teaches the disciples about his fate. *Who do people say that I am?* Can we not find both comfort and identification with his question? Jesus wants his life and ministry to be pleasing to Almighty God.

In *Essay IX*, Ralph Waldo Emerson writes: *The philosophy of six thousand years has not searched the chambers and magazines of the soul. In its experiments there has always remained, in the last analysis, a residuum it could not resolve. (Humanity) is a stream whose source is hidden. Our being is descending into us from we know not whence...I am constrained every moment to acknowledge a higher origin for events than the will I call mine.*” We, like Jesus Christ, know that hidden source to be God. And our struggle with the question of: *Who do people say that I am*, is our yearning to please God and know God’s purpose for our life; to have a life with purpose, a life that is not in the final analysis half-lived.

You and I are to be striving to have our wills joined with the will of Jesus Christ. The highest knowledge of ourselves that we can attain is the joining of our wills with the infinite will of God. I believe that the starting point for this desire is to like Peter, boldly confess Jesus as our Messiah. To make such a claim means that our lives witness to the fact that Jesus is the Lord of our life. This is not easy...Peter objects...and Jesus responds, *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.* Tough words then, and perhaps even tougher words today. Taking up our cross, joining our will with the Divine will, becoming all that God would have us be—these three are at the heart of the question: *Who do people say that I am?*

Yesterday, I once again experienced one of the great joys of being a priest—celebrating and officiating at a marriage. Because of our restoration, the Trinity wedding of Gavin Edwards and Chris Hendrickson took place at First Presbyterian Church through their graciousness. And in our Book of Common Prayer’s service I once again prayed the following prayer for the newly married couple: *Grant that their wills may be so knit together in your will, and their spirits in your Spirit, that they may grow in love and peace with you and one another all the days of their life.*

In the middle of the season of Pentecost, as fall quickly approaches, we come to this lifelong question once again: *Who do people say that I am?* We can find comfort in these words of Jesus the person, and we should be simultaneously challenged by these very same words of Jesus the Messiah; taking up our cross, joining our will with the Divine will, becoming all that God would have us become. **+Amen.**