

## Reflection on the Word: September 16, 2018

### James 3:1-5a, 9-12; Mark 8:27-38

As a minister, in all of my pastoral care experience, in all of the visits I've made with the sick at home and in hospital, I would have to say that one of the most challenging illnesses for families to cope with is not cancer, as many might think, but Alzheimer's. And that's because it is a disease which strips away identity. It is so difficult when persons with Alzheimer's slowly lose touch with memory, with who they are, and with their family and community identity. So hard to deal with when they become lost for the person their family once knew and loved. Loss of identity is hard.

Today's gospel presents us with a question of identity – Jesus' identity and ours. Jesus is travelling with his disciples on a very significant journey from his ministry of teaching and healing in Galilee toward his suffering and death in Jerusalem. They are at mid-point, in Caesarea Philippi, when Jesus asks, "Who do people say I am?"

It's an interesting question, because by this time in Mark's story, the disciples have been with Jesus for some time and have seen him cure the sick and lame, cast out demons, feed literally thousands of people, even restore life to a young girl. Little wonder, then, that Jesus might ask what the crowds thought of all this. And the disciples do not disappoint, reporting that the crowds indeed recognize Jesus as a prophet, like Elijah; a holy man of God.

Then Jesus gets to what seems like his real question, asking the disciples themselves, "Who do YOU say I am?" Again, the disciples come through, or in particular, Peter, who declares that Jesus isn't just a prophet but is actually the long-awaited Messiah, the one anointed by God to save all of Israel.

For the people of that day, the expectation was that the Messiah, like a triumphant warrior, would deliver them from Roman rule, fulfilling their hopes for freedom, wholeness, and fullness of life.

But Jesus redefines their Messiah expectation as he begins to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. In essence, Jesus is saying that he will save them, he will save the world --- but not by military power and might. He will do it through the cross of self-giving; by identifying with and embracing the world's brokenness, sickness, and suffering. And he says to his disciples: "If you want your hopes for true life fulfilled, you will need to do the same."

When Jesus posed that question, "Who do you say I am?", he didn't just ask: "Are you for me or against me?" That would be too easy. All sorts of people were 'for' Jesus. The crowds were for him – he was their miracle worker. The hungry were for him – he was their next meal. The political

revolutionaries were for him – he was trouble for the Romans. The sick were for him – he was the great healer who made them feel whole again. No – Jesus didn't merely ask, "Are you for me or against me?" He asked a question of identity – "Who do you believe me to be?" It was a question, the answer of which, had, and still has, great implications for the one responding. Because to be a follower is not simply to name Jesus with a 'correct' title (*you are the Messiah*) but rather it involves the hard consequences of following in Jesus' way.

And in Mark's gospel, who Jesus is leads directly to what Jesus does – standing with those on the margins, advocating for the poor, challenging oppressive religious systems, offering forgiveness and healing, all in an effort to restore hope and the fullness of life that Jesus proclaimed as the "Kingdom of God."

Jesus' life and ministry serves as a model for us, in our own discipleship. We are called to follow His way – which is marked not by might but by love and vulnerability, not by the accumulation of possessions but by sacrificial giving, not by glory but by the cross.

With the question "Who do you say that I am?" the spotlight becomes focused on each and every one of us. It is not merely a question Jesus asked of disciples long ago --- he continues to ask it. As followers of Jesus, how we answer that question says something about our very basic belief and at the same time impacts on our lives – our work, our families, our views of the world and how we relate to one another.

And the way we answered that question as a youth in Sunday School will not be the same way we answer that question as an adult. Learning about the significance of Jesus for our lives is a life-long process. Our Christian faith is not meant to be static – As the world evolves, as our lives change, and we grow ... so must our faith, so must our sense of what is right and wrong, our understanding of how Jesus calls us to be in relationship with others, our sense of inclusiveness, our call to ministry and mission.

Jesus was continually challenging people of his day to see with new eyes and new understanding some of the long-held traditions and beliefs of their faith. Over and over, he called them from doctrine into relationship ... relationship with God and neighbour. And in the same way, he calls the church today.

Former United Church Moderator and Cape Bretoner, the Rev. Clarke MacDonald, once said: "If I wanted a church which had a tidy little package of beliefs ... stamped with some kind of good housekeeping seal of approval of infallible doctrine and delivered as an expression of absolute truth - then I would *not* look to the United Church of Canada.

But if I wanted a church where people have convictions but were nevertheless open to different viewpoints, where they believed in the

acceptance of people, though not necessarily everything they say and do, and that to APPLY the faith is more important than to *preserve* it, then I would say the United Church is my kind of church." And he went on to say: "Beware of the church that glibly says, in a simplistic way, 'Christ is the answer'. But take seriously the church which says, 'The answer is to be found *in Christ*; and finding it and working out the implications of it is a lifetime vocation."

That's why, in the United Church of Canada, as a denomination, we are engaged in dialogue – with Jews and Muslims and other faith traditions – who can teach us truths about God and the world and with whom we can work in partnership to build a better world.

That's why we continue to live out our apology to First Nations peoples for our involvement in residential schools which were all about assimilation – robbing children of their language and culture, subjecting them to abuse and taking them from their families, destroying households and whole communities.

That's why, acknowledging diverse expressions of sexual identity, as a denomination, we hold that the sanctity of marriage is found in the expression of mutual love and grounded in trusting, respectful relationship, whether it be between heterosexual or same gender persons.

That's why we advocate for justice for people who are victims of marginalization and oppression; supporting refugees, and ministries that work with the poor, the homeless, the mentally ill. All of this, and so much more, is the living out of our response to the question of Jesus – "Who do you say that I am?"

It is never enough to know what other people have said about Jesus. A person might read the Bible and every book there is on Christology, and still not be a Christian. You see, Jesus must be part of us at more than just a head-level. He must dwell in our hearts ... though it's sometimes hard to know just what that means.

A Sunday School teacher had been talking with her class of five-year-olds about how Jesus can come and live in our hearts. Jessie must have been thinking about this as she drove home with her Dad after church. She leaned over and put her head on his chest. "What are you doing?" he asked her, with a smile. "I'm listening for Jesus in your heart," she replied. "And what do you hear?", her dad queried. She thought carefully for a moment, and then answered, "It sounds like Jesus is making coffee."

What is the sound of Jesus in *your* heart? Is there love with every heartbeat? Does the rhythm echo tones of forgiveness, acceptance, compassion? When Jesus dwells in our hearts, he is woven intricately into our very life – what we think and feel; what we say and do. In the letter of James we are reminded that our tongues can work for good or ill ... and that what we say really matters. That goes for what we put out there in

cyberspace, too – in our tweets, our facebook postings, and so on. That's one lesson Donald Trump has taught us!

Our religion is more than just a tale to be told; or a set of rules to be followed. It is a way of living. And to every one of us, Jesus comes asking, not "can you tell me what others have written and said about me?", but "Who do YOU say I am?"

Mother Teresa, that petite little nun who worked with the poor of India, who was named a Saint by the Catholic Church, still stands, even after her death, as a model of one who knew intimately who Jesus was and gave herself completely to doing his will.

In the face of each of those she cared for, Mother Teresa also saw the face of Christ. "Whatever I do, I do it for Jesus," she said. And for all those sick and poor and marginalized to whom Mother Teresa reached out, Jesus became very real.

In her touch was the touch of Christ, as she tenderly and compassionately ministered to the many suffering men, women, and children around her. Like Mother Teresa, only as we have a deeper sense of who Jesus is, are we able to define who we are in relationship to him and to the way in which he calls us to live.

Karen Mitchell, writing in the United Church Observer, many years back, said: When Jesus asks 'Who do you say that I am?', it is not that he needs the answer. It is that we need the question – in order that we might find our connection to the meaning of life and our part in it.

If we can respond to the question of Jesus, "Who do **YOU** say **I** am?" then we are also well on our way to responding to that inner question, "Who am I?" For in coming to know Jesus more fully, we also come to know better who we are as his faithful followers.

Who is Jesus for you? That is the question ... it is a question of identity, both his and ours, and the answer is part of a life-long process of journey and discovery.

And so we pray: Come, Lord Jesus, break open our hearts that we might come to know you and perceive your profound love for us and all people and receive your mercy and grace. Amen.