

12 Pentecost, Proper 16, Yr. A

August 23, 2020

Romans 12: 1-8, Matthew 16:13-20

Rather than starting with the text this morning, I'm going to start with a story. It's about one of those fellows who walked across tight ropes in really dangerous settings. He was preparing to do so one day and a crowd had gathered to watch. He was not only going to walk across a huge drop on a tight rope, but he was going to do so while pushing a wheelbarrow. Turning to the crowd, he asked them: DO YOU THINK I CAN DO THIS? They all responded with an enthusiastic YES. But then came the next question: GOOD. WHO WOULD LIKE TO RIDE IN THE WHEELBARROW?

That story points out the difference between theoretical or "head" knowledge and the kind of knowledge that leads to commitment, the kind of knowledge that requires that you change, not only the way you think, but also the way you live. That's what's going on the Matthew and Roman readings this morning.

Looking first at Matthew. It's interesting to note the location of this conversation. You'll remember that some of us went to Israel some years ago. One of the places we visited was Caesarea Philippi. It's a site where questions about the divine come naturally. At the time of Jesus, there would have been scattered shrines dedicated to the Syrian god Baal in that area. It also contains the headwaters of the Jordan River, so there were powerful

Judaic connections there too. In addition, the site is believed to have been the birthplace of the Greek god, Pan, the god of nature, flocks, forests and wild animals. I remember the guide telling us that sacrifices would be offered there; the sacrifice would be thrown into the river and if the river then flowed clear, the sacrifice was accepted, but if it was bloody, the sacrifice was refused. Besides that, Philip, one of the sons of Herod the Great, had a constructed a temple of white marble dedicated to Augustus, the Roman emperor and god. So, in that setting, we find Jesus, a homeless, penniless carpenter from Galilee and his disciples, 12 ordinary guys, to whom he puts two questions. The first one is easy. WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM? It's easy because all you have to do is repeat the scuttlebutt: some say John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah. But then comes the second question, much harder: BUT YOU, WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM? We've perhaps all been in a somewhat similar spot, when the teacher asks a question that no one really knows the answer to. You can picture those disciples, looking down, pretending to take notes, pushing the dirt around with their sandals, can't you? One wonders how long the silence lasts. It's been said that you can tell what part of the country a person is from by how long they can stand those kinds of silences. I believe it was New Yorkers who had the least tolerance, who were most apt to jump in and say SOMETHING, ANYTHING, to break the tension. So Peter must have been from New York. He jumps in. YOU ARE THE MESSIAH, THE SON

OF THE LIVING GOD, is what he says. And Jesus replies by saying that Peter is blessed in that answer. So Peter got the words right. The word Messiah meant the anointed one. In Jewish history, kings and priests were anointed but the Messiah, the promised liberator, the person of exceptional goodness who would restore not only Israel but the whole created order, was also the anointed one. If you remember the text, you'll also remember that Peter got the words right but just after what we heard this morning, Jesus goes on to predict his suffering and death and Peter rebukes him – that's NOT what a Messiah is about. And that comment moves Peter from the head of the class and earns him a rebuke from Jesus: get thee behind me, Satan. Saying the words isn't enough. Remember a couple of weeks ago, I commented on people I encountered in Dallas who thought that one was saved only when one said, JESUS IS MY LORD AND SAVIOR, which could be countered by Jesus himself saying, IT'S NOT THOSE WHO SAY TO ME, LORD, LORD...BUT THOSE WHO DO THE WILL OF MY FATHER.

I'd like to enlarge the context here a bit. It's been said that western civilization is like the torso of a body built on two legs – one leg is Greek and the other is Hebrew. The Greeks built great philosophical and metaphysical systems. But they also, like the Gnostics, were dualists, dividing body and mind. The mind was far superior, the body was simply a prison house from which the mind

needed to be liberated. The Hebrews had a different vision. For them mind and body, or soul and body, were one. For them, knowledge came not from abstract reasoning, but from personal encounter. So when Jesus asks his disciples who they say that he is, he's asking them, and us as well, what difference the encounter with him has made in our lives. WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM, followed by HOW HAS THAT MATTERED TO YOU?

With that as background, look at this portion of Paul's letter to the Romans. BECAUSE YOU HAVE ENCOUNTERED JESUS, Paul is saying, now live out what you have come to know. Present your bodies as living sacrifices, live out God's will for you and for the world. Live it out by doing what's good, acceptable and perfect. Live it out by identifying your gifts and then putting those gifts to work in the larger community of the Body of Christ. And those gifts are all different and that difference is essential to the health, not only of individual bodies, but also communities. Just as an individual can't live without the diverse contributions of each part of the body, so it is with the larger community.

This is totally relevant to today's conversation about the Black Lives Matter movement. Some who are offended by that statement counter it by saying the all lives matter and that is totally true. But one legacy of slavery has been that black lives and black bodies have been seen as somehow lesser, and when that happens, when bodies aren't valued, aren't seen as temples of the Holy Spirit, then

exploitation, cruelty and indifference to suffering are close behind. We can look today at child abuse or sex trafficking or sales of drugs – all instances of failure to understand that bodies matter.

BBT tells the story of a woman who came out of church one morning and saw a man standing on the sidewalk, looking up at the church steeple. When he saw her, he asked: WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IN THERE? Taken aback, and perhaps somewhat like those disciples in today's Gospel, she struggled to try to think of what to say. In the end, he said, NEVER MIND. SORRY TO HAVE BOTHERED YOU and walked away. It's that same question that Jesus asks each one of us: WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE IN THERE – WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE ABOUT ME – WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE SO WHOLEHEARTEDLY THAT IT CHANGES HOW YOU LIVE?

It's a question that needs to be asked and answered frequently. Amen.