

Pentecost XV (Sermon Proper 16 A)

St. John's Episcopal Church

Jamaica Plain, MA

August 24, 2008

In the name of God, our creator and redeemer and life-giving spirit.

About mid-way through the semester in our World Religions class at Bunker Hill Community College, we finally come to the western religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Many of the students are surprised to learn how similar these three religions are. They discover that all three religions believe in the same God. All hold the scriptures and the prophets as a revelation of God, all of them urge their followers to obey God's will and to keep the commandments. But, once they see all the similarities, the Christian students wonder what is different about Christianity. Given all the ways in which we are similar, they ask, what makes us different? What I do at that point is I ask them: For Jews, Muslims and Christians, what is the word of God and how do we encounter God? For Jews, I hold up a copy of the Torah. For Muslims, I hold up a copy of the Quran. For Christians I hold up an icon of Jesus Christ. Because the basic answer about our difference from our Jewish and Muslim cousins, is what we say about Jesus Christ. He was crucified, died and was buried. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God. He "brought us out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life."

So, the question posed for us by Jesus in today's gospel is the basic question of our Christian lives. It is not just another question, among a long list of questions that we need to answer. It is **THE** question. Jesus looks his

disciples in the eyes and asks them: "Who do you say that I am?" Everything rides on the answer. But this is not a question and answer session like in school, where we learn the material and then are tested on what we have stored in our heads. No, this is not a question about what we know. This is a question about who we are and whose we are. This is about our life. Because Christianity is about an encounter with Jesus Christ. Christianity is about making a decision to belong to Jesus Christ. Christianity is about conforming ourselves to Jesus Christ. Christianity is about becoming the image of Jesus Christ so that when people look at us they see the face of Christ. So, our answer to his question, "Who do you say that I am?" shapes the whole of our life.

It is at one level a question for our prayer. Imagine Jesus Christ looking into your eyes and asking you this question. Do you say that I am God's revelation? the preacher of the reign of God? Are you willing to take up your cross daily and follow me? Can you learn from me because I am gentle and humble of heart? Can you seek first the kingdom of God and God's glory? Can you wash one another's feet? Can you love your neighbor as yourself? Can you love your enemies and do good to those who hate you and pray for those who persecute you? Can you invite me ever more deeply into your life so that in the end it is I who live there? Can you live into this mystery until you can say with St. Paul "for me to live is Christ?"

This is harder than it sounds because many of us live our lives on parallel tracks. There's our work life, our home life and family, our church life: professional, personal and religious lives all distinct. And often we spend a lot of energy keeping them separate. When I was a child I had rules about my dinner plate. I was an only child and my father spoiled me, so I got to make my own rules. Nothing on my dinner plate could touch

anything else. No vegetables could touch the meat. And no gravy from my mashed potato valley could roll over onto my salad. Now this may work for dinner, but it doesn't work for life. I can't have my professional life at the 2 o'clock position, my religious life at the 6 o'clock position, my family at the 10 o'clock position. It is all one life. And it is all God's life. As a Christian, I don't have a separate life from my life with God. Everything touches everything else.

Now, you may not have been as silly as I was about my dinner plate. You may have allowed your gravy or sauce to run freely into your bread or beans, but you may understand my desire to keep some parts of my life away from the demands of the gospel. Surely, it would be OK if this little tiny section of my life was just mine to run as I saw fit. No need to surrender even this little tiny section to God's will and God's grace. But that is not how it works.

When I fail in this, as I often do, God's grace supplies. When I wander off in a different direction, as I am often tempted to do, the cross of Christ leads me back. When I resist God's grace, and try to keep God out, the love of God draws me in. And so each day I need to hear again this question about who Christ is for me. Because the answer to this question is the answer to how I live my life, day after day.

But, we are not speaking only about our personal relationship with Jesus Christ, important as that may be. We are together the body of Christ, here at St. John's brought together with different gifts and graces, strengths and limitations, virtues and faults, to be assembled by the Holy Spirit into the mystical body of Christ. When Christ asks you as a parish: "Who do you say that I am?" your answer determines how you live together at St. John's, what shape your community life takes, what is important to

you, where you put your time, and energy and money, what you pray about, what you fear, what you long for, what makes you laugh and what makes you cry. Is your life together becoming ever more clearly the image of Jesus Christ? Is your community life centered on those things which are at the heart of Christ: obedience to God, zeal for God's reign, faithfulness to prayer, reaching out in compassion and forgiveness? Do you rejoice at the variety of people whom God has sent to this church, or do their differences from you cause annoyance and friction? Are there places in your parish life which you are trying to keep separate from the demands of the gospel? A corner of your dinner plate just for you, safe from the sign of the cross?

To become part of the body of Christ is the call of our baptism. To live our lives with the same hopes and dreams and passions as Jesus Christ is the call of our baptism. To come together in community to grow more deeply into the image of Jesus Christ is the call of our baptism. And we are here this morning because we want to answer this call. We are here this morning because God has invited us to share in the body of Christ to be shaped into the body of Christ. We eat this sacred meal so that we can become a sign of salvation for one another, for this city and for the whole world. We share the body of Christ aware that the person on either side of us is also the body of Christ.

"Who do you say that I am?" Many of us struggle with this question and with our answer. We have the answers of our ancestors in the faith, in creeds, and liturgies and theologies. But Christ is alive and the Holy Spirit is poured out on us to give us the courage to answer this question for our own time. For 2008. Here. Now. We move into God's future without all the answers! But we move in faith, hearing Christ's question posed to us.

Finding our answer, living our answer, day after day until God calls us home.

And so to God whose power now at work in us can do infinitely more than we can even ask for or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus now and forever. Amen.