

Sermon for Sunday, August 24, 2008
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16)
By Tim Ljunggren

First Lesson	Exodus 1:8—2:10
Psalm	Psalm 124
Second Lesson	Romans 12:1-8
Gospel	Matthew 16:13-20

“Who do you say I am?”

That question that Jesus asks us this morning goes to the core of our very being, doesn't it? It asks us to examine—fully and completely—how we view not only Jesus himself, but ourselves as well.

We are a questioning people, aren't we? We question everything—who are we? Where are we going? Are we on the right path? Do we have the right job? Do we have enough money in the bank?

We question each other—what have you done for me lately? Are you living up to my standards? Are you making me look bad? Are you doing for me what I really should be doing for myself?

In to these mix of questions, Jesus comes with another—“Who do you say I am”?

For many of us, Jesus is nothing more than a historical figure who had some good—yet naïve—ideas about how the world should be. For others, Jesus' question of self-identity is answered with a clichéd response that doesn't go deep enough. For many more, there is no answer to Jesus' question—there is simply silence, a loss of words because of a faith that has grown stagnant.

“Who do you say I am”?

Jesus' question cuts to our hearts. We can't answer that question without defining who we are as well—in defining Jesus, we define ourselves.

So, who are we? And how would we answer Jesus?

Many of us are caught up in the blame game, and we define ourselves, along with defining Jesus, with a litany of complaints. These complaints are nothing more than a smoke screen where we can hide, our shadowy forms taking root, pointing fingers and spewing acid. When this happens, we define ourselves as a people who are deeply hurt, unable to make sense of our lives, our selves, and our God. We look at Jesus and we desperately want to see him for who he is, but our pain gets in the way. Our definitions of ourselves and Jesus are muddy and incoherent at best, as we continue to embrace our pain.

That pain becomes our identity.

Soon, very soon, our pain turns into apathy. We simply don't care anymore, and we simply stop becoming involved. We look at the world we live in and find it to be wanting. We look at ourselves and find ourselves to be wanting. But we don't have the strength anymore to move beyond the quagmire of our discontent. We give up. We lose hope. We lose faith. Our definition of Jesus is a definition of surrender to a belief that God really doesn't care and really doesn't want to be involved in our lives. We draw back. We close up. We shut down. We walk away.

That apathy becomes our identity.

Yet, Jesus still haunts us with that damnable question, doesn't he? He won't let us rest. He won't let us sit back. He won't let us off the hook.

"Who do you say I am"?

Gradually—just as gradually as the green leaves of summer turn to the bright, rusted colors of fall—we come to the realization that Jesus defies all definitions. We can't define something that we don't understand, and if we're completely honest with one another, we really don't understand this Jesus at all. That's why we keep getting it wrong—we confuse Jesus with the wanderings of our own hearts, with the trappings of our own mind. We try to make God—and Jesus—into our own images, and we're loathe to give those images up. Our definition of Jesus is the definition of least resistance, a definition based on comfort rather than challenge, on restlessness rather than hope.

And yet—and this is the funny part—Jesus chose us to build his church. Despite our pain. Despite our apathy. Despite our restlessness. Despite who we are and who we think we are. Jesus builds his church on us because there are no others, there is no one except us to bring forth the message that Jesus proclaims over

and over and over again. We are the ones destined to become the bedrock of our faith, not because of our puffed up notions of ourselves, but because we have the capacity for humility and love and grace, which is given to us as gifts from God.

How, then, can we define Jesus? By recognizing the fact that our definition comes from how we treat one another. How we serve one another. How we love one another. We define Jesus when we allow others to define him through us and our actions. And that definition must never remain stagnant, must never be atrophied by discontent. We are called to serve Jesus by becoming his church, despite our follies and despite our imperfections. We are called to be a church because that's all Jesus has—and that's all Jesus wants.

“Who do you say I am”?

Come, let's answer that question together. ...

Amen.

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