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Friday, September 10, 2021
Year B Proper 19 - Rally Day

James 3:1-12
Mark 8:27-38

Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?"

- Welcome back! It's Kickoff Sunday!
 - We have been planning this one for a while, and pulled out all of the stops, so to speak
 - Invitations were sent, ministries began to plan their program year
 - 8AM donuts
 - 10AM baptisms and pig roast
 - Not only many things happening just today, but so many of our ministries returning to semi-normal offerings
 - And I hope you're here because you want to be a part- to participate, to give and receive, to be a part of who St. Michael's will be this next year
 - To be a part of our identity as a church, a part of our work in this Kingdom of God we are trying to help build
 - Some clergy colleagues of mine argue that you should not have a Kickoff Sunday, because the church should always be going!
 - Maybe true, but practically speaking, the summer so often brings travels and vacations for all of us, me included, and we are spread thin
 - And it is just awesome to have a day to intentionally reconnect as a church and get ready for the year ahead of us
 - And this year needs it even more than most- especially after what has been a hard time of reduced in-person ministries and fellowship
 - And while COVID is still raging around us, and we are still in masks,
 - I think we are learning to navigate through it safely and effectively, and to manage the risks
 - I think we may be learning how to do church during a pandemic for quite a while longer
 - I am now convinced that we must learn to be church in the midst of a pandemic, rather than sitting and waiting for it to end
 - But like every year when I prepare for Kickoff each September, and even more poignantly this year- there is the big question on my mind
 - The Gospel touches on it today, so that was very helpful

- The question I ask is: who are we, “who do people say we are?”
 - What do we want and need to be?
- Big questions, identity questions, questions about purpose, vision, and mission
- It can be about reflecting on where we have been, celebrating the present moment, and bringing our hopes for what could be next
- Today, underneath all of the window dressing, is that question: Who are we going to be?
- In today’s Gospel from the book of Mark, Jesus is leading the disciples through a similar process of identity formation
 - He asks them first, “Who do people say that I am?, and then, “Who do you say that I am?”
 - Now this is an important turning point in the Gospel of Mark
 - It is the first time Jesus tells the disciples that he is going to die¹, and you can see it does not sit well with any of them, especially Peter
 - You gotta love Peter- he is only stating the obvious answer that everybody was thinking
 - He rebukes Jesus! I think in part because he could not imagine such an outcome
 - He has so much faith, and there’s no question as to why
 - We are in the first half of the gospel, and up until this point Jesus has been hurriedly moving from place to place
 - And from miracle to miracle - Peter has seen it all
 - Healing people, casting out demons, calming the storm, raising the young girl thought dead
 - Feeding the five thousand, and then another four thousand
 - Walking on water.
 - And we get here and Jesus asks them, who do people say that he is, and more importantly, who do they say that he is
 - We should not be surprised by their answer: “the Messiah!”
 - How could he not be, after all the amazing things Jesus has done
 - It was a small leap of faith to believe that Jesus would one day soon march on Jerusalem, over throw the Romans
 - Purge the temple of the corruption
 - And establish God’s nation of Israel on Earth once again!

¹ *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, Marion Soards, ed., Year B Pentecost 2, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993) 45

- I believe that while Peter was technically correct in his answer of Jesus being the Messiah,
- He was not correct in his understanding of what that meant.²
- Peter was both right and wrong.³
- And Jesus orders them to tell no one because they do not understand themselves yet
- And Jesus tells them about his impending tragedy.
- Being a Messiah, and being a disciple, is not going to be what they expect it to be.
- Rather than conquering with war and violence, they would right the wrongs from the bottom up
- With a new kind of message about God, and love, and grace, that does not include a weapon
- Here in Mark chapter 8 Jesus begins to reshape their understanding of who he is and who they are
- I think today is a great day to ask these same type of questions, Who are we, why are we here, what's the point of today?
- What do we have to offer that brings all of us out on a beautiful Sunday morning to come together and be the church?
- It's more than just a pig roast
- I think there are several things that make St. Michael's what it is, that makes it stand out a bit
- I think we offer something that is hard to find elsewhere in the religious landscape
- What you'll likely see first on Sunday morning is our worship service-our liturgy
- It is a great mix of ancient practices, with the encouragement to bring your 21st century mind with you in the pew
- Our worship connects us with Christians around the globe and throughout the millennia
- It is, at least for me, a refreshing reprieve from the secular, pop culture world.
- In some ways, it is anti-modern, it intentionally swims up stream against the current

² *Ibid.*

³ <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/proper19b>

- It is a pit stop out of our modern, too busy, too stressful, steady stream of anxiety- a crack through which the light can shine in
- In my own spirituality, the opening prayer about our hearts being open and all desires known...
 - Starts me on a detox that culminates in being receptive and fed later
- That's part of who we are
- Also at our core, St. Michael's gives back: time and time again, our Outreach ministry serves those in most desperate need
- Just this week via email, the vestry approved the distribution of the \$49K raised at the benefit concert back in July
- Each local charity receiving their equal share, and 100% of that money being sent to our community-
 - to help people, directly, immediately, locally
- There is more in the early planning, including a mission trip to Guatemala when we are able again
- And I have asked Ellen Lindeen, head of our peace and justice committee:
 - When are we able to help welcome another refugee family?
- In addition, our Christian Ed for all ages of youth is starting up
- Our Music ministry starting up- choir, I've missed you
- More and more things coming online again, and in COVID-safe ways
- I think Kick off is worth it because St. Michael's is doing all of these things- we are busy being the church.
- In many ways, we are a lot like the Episcopal Church that I first started attending in Conway- St. Peter's
 - Some of you have heard this story, I am sure, but it really gets to what we are all about- this is why I am here
 - Walking into an Episcopal Church was very different than what I had experienced before:
 - A female priest- very intriguing to a Baptist
 - A real pipe organ- no prerecorded music there
 - Announced Yoga in the Parish hall
 - Buddhist meditation retreat on a Saturday
 - This was not church as I knew it.
 - And then there was my first adult Sunday school classed they called Adult Forum
 - If anything, this, along with being invited to our first small dinner group, it what hooked us

- The class was about a dozen or so, and we were discussing the readings for that day
- The discussion was lively, and diverse
- We were reading one of the miracle stories from the Gospel
- And one gentleman spoke up and said he didn't really believe all of the supernatural stuff in the Bible
- While another at the table seemed to take it all at face value, literally occurring as it was written down in the Bible
- What an amazing event just unfolded before me: two intelligent, rational people read scripture, disagreed on what it said, and didn't start fighting
- But the church didn't split. The roof didn't cave in.
- This was just another typical Sunday morning discussion in Adult Forum.
- In this church, what united people was praying and worshipping together, not believing and thinking identically
- Not only was my regular church attendance salvaged that year, but my very faith.
- And ultimately that rich environment fostered a call my call to the priesthood
- This is my why. This is why this matters to me. This is why I think kickoff is worth it each year
- And that is what I want St. Michael's to be- not a replica of St. Peter's, but a place that creates the same open door to God
 - Makes God accessible to all of God's children- of all kinds
 - Concretely connects us to God's mission and purpose
 - Of not only answering the question, "Who are we?"
 - But faithfully working out the answer to Jesus' question, "Who do we say that he is?"
 - Like the disciples, we may think we already know, but this knowing is a journey, a process
 - Jesus invites us deeper and deeper week after week, year after year, as we gather to pray and worship together
 - Learning and knowing more and more about this God of love incarnate
 - And we can even disagree sometimes!
 - We continue to work on that question in our ministries, our small groups, and corporately on Sunday mornings
 - In eating together and praying together, thinking, discussing, and loving and welcoming people

- And this is the heart of the matter
- Following Jesus- that is who we are- followers of Christ
- And sojourners on the way of the cross with him
- Day by day, year by year, relinquishing our selves to this new way of being
- Giving ourselves piece by piece, step by step, day by day, back to the God who created us to begin with
- Until our who life is turned over and is only what God has deeply desires us to be all along.
- The God incarnate, become one of us, to reach us in a way that a list of rules failed to do.
- A God of love who came to love us, so we would know how to love each other
- And who did it all the way up to the bitter end of the cross
- And whose resurrection sends us the clear message: that violence, hatred, oppression, and systems of injustice will not always have the final word
- That it will be love in the end that triumphs even over death, that there is hope even when it feels hopeless
- And that God knows everything about us and still loves us deeply
- That is good news worth gathering around, and a great start to the question Jesus asks us.
- We have another great year lined up again at St. Michael's offering ways of doing just this.
 - So many things, and even a couple still being formulated
 - But one thing that I hope we do no matter what else is going on:
 - That we walk together, love and support one another in this journey of faith
 - That through being together, praying and worshipping together, working together through outreach and in-reach activities
 - And that through our diversity, outreach, and our worship we come to a deeper understanding of this one thing Jesus asks
 - "Who do you say that I am?"

Amen.