

EVERYONE IS SEARCHING

Sermon for February 8, 2009

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“When they found Jesus, they said to him, ‘Everyone is searching for you’”.

In nomine...

Everyone was looking for Jesus - - Peter’s mother, the townspeople gathered around the door, even Peter and his friends the next morning. People wanted to hear Jesus, and they wanted him to heal their sick. Today we are not much different.

If we were to hear that Jesus was walking around in Basking Ridge or Bernardsville, many of us would turn out to listen and to decide whether this really was Jesus returned to us. Perhaps we would judge by what he said. We might judge by seeing if he could do miracles or heal the sick. Some might even check to see what he thought of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, or women priests, or, heaven forbid, gay marriages.

Our listening, in other words, even given what we believe about Jesus, would involve our filtering his words toward our personal advantage. We would mostly hear what we wanted to hear because it supported our interests – or confirmed our opinions. That happened to Jesus in the gospels all the time. “Despite his charismatic presence, voice of authority and emerging identity as the Messiah, people listened when his message pleased them and shut him out when it didn’t.” (T. Ehrich)

“*Rise, take up your bed and walk,*” was a hit quotation. “*Woe to you rich, for you have your reward already,*” was **not** popular. It ranked right down there with “*I come to bring not peace, but the sword,*” and “*carry your own cross and follow me*”.

Human beings do this in another context as well. When we think of searching for Jesus, many of us think of “getting away” from the work / stress / people of the moment. I’m pretty sure several of us are here this morning, for the peace and beauty of the service, for the familiar words, gestures and blessing of Communion and for the friends and supportive neighbors who populate our church family. We think of praying as “getting away from it all.” We look for “balm in Gilead,” for the “peace, which flows like a river,” and for the healing of our minds and hearts which is a gift of God’s presence. We are searching, and rightly so, for Jesus the healer, Jesus the

loving creator, Jesus our friend. The people from Peter's mom's town were searching for the same thing.

The trouble with Jesus the Christ, however, is that he never stays in just that one role very long. People didn't – and we don't – merely meet Jesus the healer. There is also Jesus the hungry man. (What did Peter's mom do? – She got up and fed thirteen people!). We – and they – also meet Jesus the preacher, Jesus the judge, Jesus the prophet:

“Meeting our Lord in prayer, in church or out in the world can be an encounter of balm and healing. But it won't be a place of escape. There is no escape. Our lives and the world's problems need to be resolved, not escaped. As the crowds found Jesus, so do life's problems find us. The point of prayer and worship isn't to escape problems, but to gather the strength to return to them.” (T. Ehrich)

In fact, that's one of the many reasons Jesus invites us here to worship this morning. We are here to meet Jesus the healer. Jesus will and does put us back in a healed relationship with God and with our neighbors.

We are also here to meet Jesus the prophet of God's Kingdom.
“Repent and believe the good news that the reign of God is in your midst”

or

“Peter, do you love me?... Feed my sheep”

Jesus' ministry, which he has given to us, is to care for the littlest, the last, and the lost.

“For if you have done this for one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you have done it for me.”

Here we also meet Jesus, the Judge of all.

“Be therefore, perfect, as your creator is perfect.”

Do you notice that all of this seems terribly pertinent to the stories in today's newspapers? All around us people are hurting. We're losing our houses, our jobs, our bankrolls, and our consumer society.

I find it hard to avoid thinking that our tendency to filter Jesus' words, and to remember only the loving and balm-filled presence parts is much of what has gotten us into trouble.

Who told people who – like my husband – work in N.Y. finance that they have a right to “get theirs”. Not Jesus. Who suggested using one’s brains, energy, one’s life, to create the illusion of wealth – which we now understand is what these last years have been? Not Jesus. Who decided that being “well off” was a more worthy life goal than teaching, or inventing, or building, or growing things, or scientific research – or a thousand other occupations that offer less personal wealth, but give our society and our world more hope, health, understanding and beauty? Certainly not Jesus.

And now, with our economic arrangements crashing down around us, who has decided that if the various governmental bodies spend money to feed the poor and heal the sick, and house the homeless, it’s a terrible use of our money? (That’s what the Senate “compromise” offered at 7 p.m. on Saturday evening. I must assume that our senators are behaving thusly because they assume a lot of people agree with them.) Who left morality and our duty to each other in the trash can?

What does scripture say was the chief duty of the man we now call “St. Peter?”

“Peter, do you love me?”
“Yes, Lord, you know that I love You.”
“Feed my sheep. Tend my lambs.”

Feeding and tending people among and around us, and across the world during the next years of economic mess will certainly not be easy. It will mean that we have to hear what Jesus is saying, not what our particular political philosophies wish that Jesus had said, or hope that he will change his mind and say.

It will also mean hanging onto our sanity, as we are renovating our economy and our communities from top to bottom. We will have to value possessions less and society’s health, wholeness and learning a lot more. We will have to learn that there are no worthless people. There are no “beneath us” tasks. No such things as wasted kindness or love. And no imaginable excuse for looking the other way as people are cheated, scapegoated, marginalized and harmed for profit.

That’s not an easy task for anyone. Those of us who have way more than we need, **and** those of us who have very little, are going to have to find a common purpose in making our communities and our country not only free, nor merely rich, but honorable, faithful, hope-filled and hard working and supremely generous and ungrudging.

How do we become the nation and people that we are not yet? We must seek God’s healing and direction in prayer and then LISTEN to what Jesus has to say – ALL of

what Jesus had and has to say. Then all of us – whether we worship in Church, Temple, Mosque or Synagogue must come together to return our society to the ways of mutual help and caring, freedom and peace.

For Isaiah promises us that whenever we seek God's face

“(God) gives...power to the faint and strengthens the powerless.”

“Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they walk and not faint.”

My friends, seek God where she is to be found. Call upon God who is near. And then go out into the world together to feed God's lambs, and tend God's sheep. For Jesus has promised to be with us always, all the way to the end of the world.

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