Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 19 All Saints’ Church

September 16, 2018/Homecoming Sunday Year B

We give you thanks, Dear Lord, that by walking in your presence,

we are dwelling in the land of the living.

In our gospel passage this morning, we are at a turning point. Jesus is launching his three-year ministry. He has been formed by the solitude of the expansive desert wilderness through fasting, testing, praying and trusting in the leading of the Holy Spirit. Who he is in his ego as Jesus is diminishing, and who he is as an instrument of God is manifesting. He is with his disciples and now he is ready to fulfill his calling. Out of contemplation, stillness, and awareness, he is ready to act.

And so he asks his disciples a question about his identity, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answer… “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others that you are one of the prophets.”

And then Jesus’ asks them, “But who do you say that I am?” We can presume that that first answer was inadequate and limited, if not just plain wrong.

And then Peter steps up to the plate with the right answer, “You are the Messiah.” Yet that answer gets him into lots of trouble. ***Of course it gets him into trouble***. You can’t bring Jesus, the Messiah, the Christ, into your life without expecting a whole lot of trouble. Like your life being turned upside down, like your heart being open to the pains of suffering, like your willingness to serve and to give things away, like your capacity to love those who are not a part of your tribe. Deep and troubling waters, yet these waters soothe a sin-sick soul.

I’d like us to explore this turning point for Jesus and his disciples with a slightly different question. Rather than ask about the identity of Jesus, let’s ask about the identity of the Church.

“Who and what do people say that the Church is?” Just as it was during Jesus’ day, that question is designed for those out there, beyond these walls, folks in their everyday living who maybe have little connection with the Church. What are they saying about the identity of the Church?

For the most part it’s not very pretty.

As many of you know, I was officiating a wedding last weekend in San Francisco, Half Moon Bay, to be exact, for the son of dear friends of mine. We’ve been friends since we were 18. I consider their son like a Godson, though, that designation would not be part of their rhetoric. Such good people doing amazing work in the world, and they love and respect who I am as priest, but they have nothing to do with the church.

I was honored when Ian and his fiancé Alissa called me to ask if I would officiate at their wedding, but I also knew it was going to be a “secular” affair. By the whims and variances of life, I have become a bit of an expert at these “secular weddings,” I’ve done so many. And I have learned that my greatest role as priest is to be Translator of all that we cherish in our tradition, in our prayers, in our vows…. to a world that might as well be on the moon, we are so different.

One of my favorite questions is about “that thing, that pretty scarf you wear around your neck- what is it?”

“This is a stole- it symbolizes the bonds and fetters with which Jesus was bound during his passion.” ***Yeah, that’s not going to work.***

I no longer say it symbolizes “the yoke of Christ,” or “the yoke of service.” Rather, I keep it simple. “I wear this because I am a minister. It’s called a stole. It’s been lovingly hand-made by a member of my Altar Guild. Come and take a look.” I’ve had some amazing conversations as we explore the intricacies of a beautiful stole… “What is an altar; Why is the cross so important to Christians; Why did you become a minister? Who is God anyway?”

The answer to these questions can’t rely on church language. That won’t work. I am constantly translating, often on the spot. It’s both exhausting and thrilling.

It’s the comments after secular weddings like these which are most telling about what many young people think. First of all, they are surprised that they were moved by the ceremony. “The service was so beautiful, so meaningful, so joyful.” (not boring and inconsequential and mean-spirited). “I understood what you were saying.” (not exclusive). “Thank you for naming our pressures and fears so clearly, and being sympathetic.” (not judgmental). “You made me cry.” (not distant or hierarchal). And secondly, they want to talk. They seek me out. They want to party and dance and drink and eat and have a blast. But they want to make a point to connect with me. And they do. And connecting with them is work. Translating is never easy.

What came as a surprise for me this year, is that the same thing happened when I preached at my sister’s ordination to the deaconate. Though my sister’s Christianity is quite expansive, her neighborhood church is quite conservative, and the parishioners there understand their faith through the atonement theory that Jesus had to die to save them from hell and damnation and that the most important act you can do is to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior. You’re toast without it. (literally).

I might as well be on the moon; I so disagree with this theology. Rather than challenge it (that won’t work), I translated my faith through different words and images, that were not “churchy”- yet still stressing God’s mercy, grace, acceptance, patience, steadfast presence not dependent on our actions, and the beauty of who we are just as we are, and the power we have in our hands to make vows, to make promises and to act.

I hit a chord with fundamentalist Christians, a chord not that different from those who have no life with the Church. So many conversations at the post-ordination-party: “You made me feel like I could just be myself (not judged as unworthy). You helped me honor my ministry (priest-piety does not rule). You admitted your failings which was so refreshing (if you’re not successful, you’re not praying hard enough). I can go on… so many examples like this. Fascinating conversations. These two worlds: fundamental Christians and the Nones, the “no affiliations” share a commonality, which is best understood as a Hunger (often undergirded by fear).

What this hunger reveals is Jesus’ next question… But who do you say that I am, or as I am asking this morning, “But who/what do you say the Church is?” That question is directed to us. How are we to address the hunger and fear so present in our world?

We lift up the Christ in translation. We say, “You who may be very different from me ***matter***. Together let’s find meaning, forgiveness, wholeness, and acceptance.”

We at All Saints’ have an incredible ministry to translate the power of “the Christ” to address the hunger and the fears that pulsate through our very being. We are here in Church trusting that we can do something that matters in ways we could never do on our own, whether it is with our snack program, our community supper, our food pantry, our singing, our praying, our worshipping, our teaching, our serving, our visiting. And we understand something really important: Our greatest teachers will often be those who are unlike us. The world needs to hear this message.

What does God have in store for us at All Saints? …. More will be coming our way. Friday I had a three-hour conversation with a stranger who sought me out, who works in the prison system and who is on an incredible journey of faith. Will this be a door opening? We have parishioners who want to explore interfaith ministry and others who want to address the opioid crisis, others the death penalty, others racism….

We can do things here beyond what we can do on our own. Together trusting in both transcendence and inclusion, we help each other empty ourselves of our own obstacles to God. And in this shared emptiness, we will encounter the enormity of God’s presence. Or in other words: Church takes us out of ourselves and puts us on the path of God, walking on “the Way,” following Jesus as our lead. Alleluia. AMEN