

Pentecost 15B Proper19 Sermon 091309
Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19
or Wisdom of Solomon 7:26-8:1
or
Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 116:1-8
James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

In the name of the God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit, Amen.

Theologians, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and James Cone found themselves all at the same time at Caesarea Philippi. Who should come along but Jesus, and he asked the four famous theologians the same Christological question, “Who do you say that I am?”

Karl Barth stood up and says: ‘You are the *totaliter aliter*, the *vestigios trinitatum* who speaks to us in the modality of Christo-monism.’

Not prepared for Barth’s brevity, Paul Tillich stumbled out: ‘You are he who heals our ambiguities and overcomes the split of our angst and existential estrangement; you are he who speaks of the theonomous viewpoint of the *analogia entis*, the analogy of our being and the ground of all possibilities.’

Reinhold Niebuhr gave a cough for effect and said, in one breath: ‘You are the impossible possibility who brings to us, your children of light and children of darkness, the overwhelming oughtness in the midst of our fraught condition of estrangement and brokenness in the contiguity and existential anxieties of our ontological relationships.’

Finally James Cone got up, and raised his voice: ‘You are my Oppressed One, my soul’s *shalom*, the One who was, who is, and who shall be, who has never left us alone in the struggle, the event of liberation in the lives of the oppressed struggling for freedom, and whose blackness is both literal and symbolic.’

And Jesus sat down, and using His finger, wrote in the sand, ‘Huh?’

Is it any wonder that we sometimes have a difficult time understanding what Jesus means by what He says? This story – humorous though it is meant to be – shows that

even the experts on the study of who Jesus is and what His ministry means have a difficult time expressing Jesus in all of His different facets.

On the road to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked the disciples, “Who do *you* say that I am?” Peter answered Him rightly, “You are the Messiah.” But then Peter immediately showed that he didn’t really understand what that answer meant. He understood that Messiah was supposed to be a fierce warrior King in the mold of King David. So it was undoubtedly confusing for him when Jesus explained that He, the Messiah would have to undergo suffering and death at the hands of the very Romans they thought Messiah was supposed to defeat, in order to fulfill His mission. A suffering Messiah? God’s anointed having so little power that he would die at the hands of the hated Romans? It made no sense. And then Jesus really confounded them when He said,

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

So not only was the Messiah supposed to be so powerless as to get captured, tortured and killed by the enemy; but now Jesus was saying that His followers should be just as impotent as He said He was? That didn’t make any sense either. They were right, and so are you if you’ve wondered about this passage. But please believe me when I tell you that it doesn’t mean “powerless,” or “impotent” at all.

Jesus said, “If any want to become my followers, let them *deny themselves*” What Jesus talked about was not His being powerless to stop the suffering and death that

were coming His way. What He meant was that He would *voluntarily* suffer and die at the hands of the Romans, because He *chose* to be faithful to the God who called Him to give all He had.

Jesus called the Disciples – and He calls us – to voluntarily deny ourselves and take up the cross. That does not mean that we stand dejectedly, apprehensively waiting for the heavy weight of the cross to land on our backs. No, Jesus calls us to voluntarily *pick up* the cross and follow Him, leaving behind all of the things that would distract us or keep us from living the completely fulfilling life of a disciple.

Jesus called the original disciples to leave their homes and families and live as He lived, a life of constantly being on the move, never having a permanent home, and relying on the grace of God – expressed through the generosity of others – in order to take care of their basic needs.

In first century Palestine, people did not have many possessions. Life was fairly simple. The only things people really cared about were their homes, their families and the subsistence work they did to support those homes and families. So Jesus called His followers to give up all those things – all of the things that were important to them – in order to become true Disciples. In today's world, that call translates a little differently. But I would submit to you that our Lord calls us the same way He called the Disciples.

We live in a complex society where abundance is the hallmark of success. The A.C. Nielson ratings company put out statistics a while back that estimated the average

American child sees 20,000 television commercials per year¹. That is nearly 385 TV commercials a week. Personally, I think they badly undercounted. And that's not counting "advertisements on billboards and bus seats, in newspapers and magazines, on clothes with designer and product logos,²" Setting aside the ever-growing number of ads that try to convince us we're sick to get us to go to the doctor and ask for a new prescription, and those for other television shows, the vast majority of those commercials are designed to sell us newer, bigger, flashier, more expensive stuff. And it's not just advertising.

There are entire television channels dedicated to showing us how to spend our money, and what we absolutely have to have if we're truly going to be successful. Take for example the Home Shopping Network. Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, this network has people bringing out clothing, TVs, computers, garden equipment, tools, cameras, kitchen gadgets – and don't forget the jewelry that appears every few hours like clockwork. And HSN is not alone. There is a channel that sells knives all day every day and one that is a non-stop jewelry auction. And what most of these channels – as well as the endless infomercials that we are subjected to – have in common is; what they are selling is almost never a necessity in our lives. It's just stuff for us to buy and own.

¹ <http://www.csun.edu/science/health/docs/tv&health.html>

² Herb Miller, Stewardship Nuggets, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2004

One of the great – if always profanity laden – social commentators of our generation, George Carlin, had a wonderful routine about our relationship to our “stuff.”

In it, he said:

[A]ll you need in life, a little place for your stuff. That's all your house is: a place to keep your stuff. If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house. You could just walk around all the time.

A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you're taking off in an airplane. You look down, you see everybody's got a little pile of stuff. All the little piles of stuff. And when you leave your house, you gotta lock it up. Wouldn't want somebody to come by and take some of your stuff. ... That's what your house is, a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get...more stuff!

Sometimes you gotta move, gotta get a bigger house. Why? No room for your stuff anymore.³

And today there is a huge industry in this country, built around places to store the stuff that won't fit into our houses – including businesses that will bring a storage box to our house and park it while we determine what stuff we want them to take and store somewhere else ... leaving us room in our house to, what else?, go and get more stuff.

Jesus understood the problem that people have with possessions, and the money it takes to obtain them. That's why He told the Disciples to *deny themselves*, take up their crosses and follow Him. He understood that until they learned how to deny their need to possess things, they could never truly understand the idea that *everything they had* belonged to God and not to them. That's why He sent them out on a mission trip with nothing but the clothes on their backs. It helped them understand the freedom that would

³ <http://www.writers-free-reference.com/funny/story085.htm> All material the property of George Carlin

come from taking up their cross – the freedom that comes from true discipleship; working for and depending upon God in all things.

Now don't think for a moment that I am claiming immunity from the problem of being controlled by my stuff. I am as guilty as anyone. But I will tell you this: just like the Disciples, I am "downwardly mobile." When I do allow myself to let go of the need to possess things – the need to feel superior to someone else because of what I have "earned" – I feel the closest to God and the most like a disciple.

When I *choose* to lay all of life's glittering images aside and concentrate on Jesus' call to discipleship, I can experience the freedom of one who is not weighed down by what he owns. Freedom comes from seeing that I don't have to be the owner, I just have to care for (be the steward of) everything God has put in front of me. That's a wonderful kind of freedom indeed.

Amen.