Sermon
September 16, 2018 - Proper 19B
The Rev. Gary R Brower, PhD

What does this mean?

[Kneel on one knee.]

Well, it's kind of physical Rorschach/ink-blot test, isn't it? If I was wearing a football jersey this year, some might be reminded of Colin Kaepernick. A few years ago, the same action might have suggested Tim Tebow. Of course, I'm wearing liturgical vestments, so you might assume I was kneeling in prayer. But, in street clothes . . . perhaps a marriage proposal. In the royal court in England, homage to the Queen. And, of course, with any of these interpretations, there would be supporters and detractors of the action . . . even among people in this room!

I was thinking about this "Rorschach test" this week when a Facebook meme showed up in my inbox. It was a photo of author Alice Walker, accompanied by an apparent quote: "Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God." This quote, and my musings about kneeling on one knee, of course, lead the questions of what "Jesus" do I bring, do you bring, to church today? It is the key question in the middle of our reading from mark's Gospel: "You, who do you say that I am?" asks Jesus.

Clearly, this was an important encounter between Jesus and his disciples — Matthew, Mark and Luke all record it, although the context in each book is a bit different. But let's look at Mark specifically. The question in Mark's Gospel is found almost halfway through the the story of Jesus' public ministry; in many ways it's a fulcrum. You'll recall that there is no account of Jesus' parentage or birth in Mark. The Gospel begins with John the Baptist's preaching . . . and then Jesus arrives on the scene. He is baptized by John and heads to the wilderness.

It is only after John's arrest that Jesus begins his work. He begins, picking up where John left off, preaching about repentance an the coming realm of God. He begins teaching in synagogues. He calls Peter, Andrew, James and John to follow him. He cures, or heals a lot of different kinds of folks: a demoniac, a leper, a paralytic, a man with a withered hand, Peter's mother-in-law, and, as we heard last week, the Syrophoenician woman's daughter and a deaf-mute.

Beyond all that making-people-whole activity, he broke tradition/law by eating with sinners and violating the Sabbath. He sent demons into pigs. He fed thousands, twice! He redefined Pharasiac traditions. and, he restored Jairus's caught to life. The result of this was that, in today's language, there was a lot of "buzz" about Jesus; according to first-first-century Google and Facebook, stories about him were "trending".

And, then we arrive at our reading for today. It almost seems to me that Jesus as, as they say, "taking the temperature of the room". I like to think that there was a

genuine curiosity on Jesus' part. We have to believe he had some good idea of his mission—it was apparent at the beginning: he proclaimed "the gospel of God. The time has arrived; the kingdom of God is upon you. Repent, and believe the gospel" (1.15). So, if that was his mission, was he fulfilling it? He asks "Who do folks say I am?" And, given the sense of expectation—despair and hope—that marked the society at that time, the answers came: "John the Baptist, Elijah, another of the prophets". Maybe these answers surprised Jesus, maybe not. I wonder what his reaction to Peter's answer —"You are the Messiah"—might have been? But Jesus' response is a bit surprising: "Don't tell anyone!" And, then, he proceeds to redefine what "Messiah" means, and what following the Messiah implies. And Peter would have none of it! To return to Alice Walker's questions, "What Jesus did he bring with him?" What Jesus did we bring with us this day?

What Jesus DID we bring? I doubt that all the people in the room have the same Jesus. Indeed, I wonder whether, after Peter's confession, all of the disciples were on board with him, but e really only have his answer. The question, however, was addressed to all of Jesus, including us. It was an individual question then; it is an individual question today. And, really, the context aren't that different. Mark (and Matthew) locate the conversation in Caesarea Philippi, an area of Palestine (today in the Golan Heights) that was home to an active cult of the Greek god Pan. In other words, not only were Jesus' companions working out of their Jewish heritage, but in the midst of an active pagan context. I would argue that we aren't that far removed from that sort of context — there are lots of "gods" out there, either competing for our attention, or who are seeking to pass as Jesus.

So, Jesus' question remains a live one. It is a continual question before us: "You, who you you say I am?" I would suspect that, like Jesus' earlier follower, the answers we provide aren't static. I would imagine that our understandings of Jesus have changed a bit, or a lot, since we first heard about him. But, I suspect they move a bit as we encounter different needs and challenges. Indeed, even the Gospels have more than one comprehensive portrayal of Jesus, as the late New Testament scholar Marcus Borg pained out in his book *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus & The Heart of Contemporary Faith* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1995). According to Borg, there are four portrayals of Jesus:

- he was a spirit person, mediating the sacred - here would fit the healings, etc.;
- he was subversive teacher, using parables to holy people into a fresh awareness of God;
- he was a prophet criticizing the social elites of the day;
- and, as our Presiding Bishop likes to echo, he was a movement founder.

One of those descriptions may ring more true to you than another, and if I were to ask for a show of hands (I won't), I suspect that all four Jesuses are in the room. And, given that diversity, I wonder what it means for us as we move forward together at Good Shepherd.

A partial answer, or suggestion perhaps, comes from another part of Marcus Borg's book. He begins by pointing out that in all of Jesus' actions and encounters, two things are central: Spirit and compassion. He was grounded in the Spirit of God and approached every situation with compassion. As Borg writes: "Compassion was the central quality of God and the central moral quality of a life centered in God" (46). So, despite our difference, not only in how we understand Jesus, but how live our daily lives, if we are follower of Jesus, we ought live lives of compassion.

Do we model compassion to those visitors who come through the door? Do we model compassion with those in the flock with whom we disagree? Do we, as Jesus-followers, model compassion with our neighbors or co-workers who are of a different political stripe from us? Do we welcome all of the Jesus followers , with their individual crosses? Are we willing, as Alice Walker suggests, to share our Jesus with others, learning and expanding our understanding? Our answers to these questions are our answers to Jesus' charge in our reading: "If any want to become my followers, et them deny themselves and take up <u>their</u> cross and follow me" (Mk 8.35).

One thing you will come to learn about me is that I am a huge proponent of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). AI is a theory about managing change by focusing on what works well and maximizing that, rather than trying to fix what's broken. One of the key assumptions of AI has to do with questions — questions like Jesus poses to us. The assumption is stated: "The act of asking questions of an organization or group [or individual] influences the group in some way". Jesus ask us,"You, who do you say I am?" Our answers have consequences; ho we'll live out that answer tells the truth of the answer.

I want to end by reading the text of song #120 in the Green Songbook. Please just listen as I read it as a midrash—an expanded commentary—on Jesus' question, as well as a prayer. You may kneel if you like.

Will you come and follow me if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know and never be the same?
Will you let my love be shown? Will you let my name be known,
will you let my life be grown in you and you in me?

Will you leave yourself behind if I but call your name?
Will you care for cruel and kind and never be the same?
Will you risk the hostile stare should your life attract or scare?
Will you let me answer prayer in you and you in me?

Will you let the blinded see if I but call your name?
Will you set the prisoners free and never be the same?
Will you kiss the leper clean and do such as this unseen,
and admit to what I mean in you and you in me?

Will you love the "you" you hide if I but call your name?
Will you quell the fear inside and never be the same?
Will you use the faith you've found to reshape the world around,
through my sight and touch and sound in you and you in me?

Lord your summons echoes true when you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you and never be the same.
In Your company I'll go where Your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow in you and you in me.
(“The Summons”, John L Bell & Graham Maule)

Amen.