FOR GOODNESS’ SAKE!
Sermon preached by the Rev. Barbara E. Senecal-Davis
Sunday, September 16, 2012
Scripture: Mark 8:27-38

Just before my youngest daughter was born, my partner and I took our oldest daughter on
one last “just the three of us” adventure to Governors Island. We took the ferry from Atlantic
Avenue and enjoyed the beautiful June Saturday to its fullest extent. At the time, I was not sure
how my oldest was going to cope with no longer being an only child. She was used to our
undivided attention and was probably a little spoiled, by the world’s terms, in having one of us
respond quickly to her needs. She knew she was going to have a baby sister, but she could not
have had any idea how different life would be, and neither did we as parents!

I have to confess I was not prepared for the huge changes that awaited my identity as a
parent in having a second child. One KNOWS things are going to be different, in part because of
the way other parents tell you about their experience in ways that are truthful but terrifying.
It was Charlotte Wallace, a member here at the church, who put it most gently when she told me,
having a second child is nothing like doubling the work of parenting, having a second child
exponentially increases the work of parenthood. What many people don’t tell you is that your
identity as a parent changes with a second child too, it’s not just about the extra things that need
to be done, you change because the relational dynamics are dramatically different. You make
different choices, you respond differently, you just ARE different. These identity changes are
really true at many different points in one’s parenting life; we grow, we develop, we change in
how we understand ourselves in this role.

I have been fortunate as a parent because my girls really have a strong bond with each
other. I recently realized how firmly my oldest daughter had incorporated her role as a big sister
into her identity when we were coloring pictures of horses. She was trying to choose between
several drawings to color and one with two horses stood out to me so I said, trying to move the
selection process along, “how about this one with the mommy and the baby?” She replied with a
confidence that I know not to argue with, “Okay, but that’s a big sister and a baby sister!”

Our relationships shape our identity in various ways, not only how we understand who
we are, but also how others understand who we are. It is those very perceptions that Jesus is
addressing in the first part of this passage that Will read for us from the Gospel of Mark’s
community. At first his query seems to be a casual question to pass the travel time while
walking, and yet it has an underlying feel of being about something much bigger. “Who do
do people say that I am?” The disciples are not shocked by this question, they know people are
talking about WHO this man is, and they are frank in their answer to him: “John the Baptist;
Elijah; one of the prophets.” Each of these answers provide insight into how the people are
identifying with Jesus, all of those answers indicate a sense from the people that he is a great
motivator and one who is not within the system of authority but speaking outside of the cultural
norms in a way that is resonating with the crowds.

It helps to know that in the Gospel of Mark the “people” play a very important role. They
are ones from among whom many of the minor characters emerge in this gospel narrative, and
these so-called minor characters are some of the most memorable. For example, the Rev.
McCaslin preached last week about the Syrophoenecian woman who challenged Jesus to widen
the scope of his thinking and to heal her daughter, which he does, but not without a rather heated verbal debate. But there are many others too, the people who lower their friend through the roof because they can’t get to Jesus through the doorway, the hemorrhaging woman, Jairus, who is a leader in the synagogue, not to mention the thousands that Jesus fed on the hillside. In the gospel of Mark, these are the ones who exemplify faith in their momentary interactions with Jesus, serving a foil for the disciples’ own fear and lack of understanding of Jesus’ message.

However, in these verses about who he is, none of these ideas from the people about his identity really capture the fullness of his relationship to God. This time, by the disciples’ report, the people are not fully understanding who Jesus is. The people’s ideas about his identity do however tell Jesus that the people are open to comprehending the ways God’s presence is in his actions.

After hearing what the people think, Jesus then asks the disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” It is Peter who answers, “You are the Messiah.” The others do not add or subtract from Peter’s response, we can almost imagine them nodding their heads in agreement. The funny thing is, in the Gospel of Mark especially, this confident response by the disciples about Jesus’ identity is NOT the norm. In fact, after they each respond in various ways to his call, they are depicted in a majority of instances as the ones who are expressing their lack of understanding about his ministry, their fear, their lack of faith. Indeed, it will take Peter only about three verses to express that fearful attitude!

The interplay between the response of the people and the response of the disciples is an important part of the narrative in the Gospel of Mark, but we have to be careful in these verses not to jump to the conclusion that the people have it wrong and the disciples have it right. In fact, what these two responses show us is a progression. The meaning of who Jesus is changes in our minds, based on our experiences.

The people and the disciples have different experiences of Jesus so they speak differently in response to this question “Who do you say that I am?” What all parties responding to this question have is an openness to experiencing the power of God in their present moment, and that openness is what allows for Jesus’ identity to expand into fullness. The people will continue to talk and question and as his ministry continues and his death and resurrection enter the story, the openness of the people will allow his fuller identity to flourish among them. Without that openness, we would not be sitting here today.

Each week, we affirm different characteristics of who Jesus was that recognize him as the Messiah. But sometimes those words are not precisely where we are in how we are experiencing God. If we hear the response of the people with gentleness, we see an openness to who Jesus can be, and that openness is critical to cultivate. In fact, being open to understanding that WHO WE ARE allows us to understand that WHO GOD IS changes for our lives of discipleship based on our experiences. For who among us would not admit that we are more like Peter than we like to admit, sure one moment that Jesus is the Messiah and the next moment telling him to keep quiet about what that means?

In their book Mark as Story, scholars David Rhoads, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie characterize the disciples as struggling “between living on God’s terms and on human terms.” They argue that through the disciples, the Gospel of Mark shows us how “fear inhibits understanding, and misunderstanding generates fear.” There are countless examples in our world today to illustrate this point, but what Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie are pointing to is that
fear inhibits us from fully experiencing God’s presence with us. The openness of the people, even when they don’t fully get who Jesus is, serves as a reminder that our understanding of who God is to us can change.

In our psychologically minded world, identity and development of identity are part of more general conversations about how we raise our children and how we understand our own lives. Eric Erikson’s classic idea that crisis precipitates identity shifts at each stage of life has been applied to our understandings of faith, most notably by James Fowler. But we all struggle to various degrees with WHO we say we are. Who we are changes as we grow navigating childhood, adolescence, young adult, adulthood. Who we are changes as we enter and end relationships of all kinds, as we become parents, when a spouse or partner dies, or a parent or child or life-long friend; for some of us, identity deeply involves sexual preferences and gender identity. How we say who we are, changes how we answer Jesus’ question, “who do you say that I am?”

When we think in these parallels, we can then understand that Jesus’ identity like our own has a multi-layered meaning. As we encounter different people, as we have different experiences, we engage Jesus’ question “Who do you say that I am?” in different ways.

Not too long after I was ordained, I was running a few errands after work on a Sunday afternoon. It was a winter day, but not too cold, I had on a warm coat, but it wasn’t zipped all the way to my neck. Just outside the grocery store where I was going there was a homeless man asking for change. When I turned to tell him I didn’t have any money to give him, I saw him startle at the sight of my clerical collar. Then he startled me by saying, “I’m so sorry, you have a nice day, God Bless.” I could not have been more stunned. I was still getting used to people’s reactions to the clerical collar, but I was shocked and frankly saddened that this man thought his need was an imposition to me BECAUSE I was a clergy person. I waved away his apology and went into the grocery store, and when I came out I approached him and gave him my change. I didn’t muster the courage ask him why he apologized for asking me for money when he realized I was a pastor, but I think about his reaction often when I wear my collar and wish I would have addressed it with him. His understanding of my identity impacted my own understanding, not only of who I am, but of who I say Jesus is.

The complicated nature of our own identity insists that we look closely before we answer Jesus’ query, “Who do you say that I am?” It is not a one time question with a one time answer, it is a frequent question with multiple answers over time. It is a question that encourages us to experience the fullness of discipleship in the many ways God’s presence become known to us. Whoever you are, God’s presence is filling this moment, waiting for you to break open to the possibilities available as we respond to Jesus’ question, “But, who do you say that I am?”


2 Ibid, p. 125.