

A Sermon for Pentecost 15, Proper 19– Yr.B
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Greenville – September 13, 2009
Texts – Wisdom 7:26-8:1 and Mark: 8:27-38

In gratitude for the offerings of Fr. John Foley, S. J.

We welcome all of you to this Sunday, one traditionally known as Kick-off Sunday. We greet this day ready to start our schedule anew. Summer is behind us along with the simple schedule of two Sunday services. With three services on Sunday morning, Christian Formation and Education, EYC in the afternoon and Compline to close the day – this day of Sabbath is full of opportunities to experience God among us. Many people have worked many hours in preparation and prayer for all these sacred activities, for their dedication, we give thanks.

During the last few weeks, we have heard insightful sermons on the New Testament letter from James. It was already my intention to break from this brief tradition as I began to prepare for today's sermon. Yet, the first sentence from James reading would have quickly directed me toward the other scripture in today's lectionary (at least for this week). James begins by writing, "not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you who teach will be judged with greater strictness". Not the easiest scripture for the Director of Christian formation to use as her sermon for Kick-off Sunday! I will leave that one for another time when new Sunday school teachers are feeling more assured of their role and of their great wisdom.

No today, we are here to talk about 'location'. Location is that tag word for many things – in the purchase of a house, we consider location; be it neighborhood, school district, land for privacy or for farming – location is high on the list of considerations. In the opening of a business or the construction of a medical facility, we consider location.

Location can bring status – location can create exclusion – location can bring danger. In today's gospel, the location in which Jesus asked 'THE QUESTION' was central.

It was a place of politics. Everywhere you looked there were reminders of the powers that be. On one corner – a shrine to Caesar Augustus – on the other statues dedicated to the Roman heroes of old. As you entered the city limits, you were greeted with the sign, "Welcome to Philip's Caesarville!" Most Bible translations of the eighth chapter of Mark say it was "Caesarea Philippi", but in the literal Greek, it is "Caesarea of Philip". Moreover, this was an important distinction, for no one was to confuse Philip's Caesarea from the older city of Caesarea many miles away.

This was a place filled with all the disturbing nature of "politics as usual" and a showcase in all things worldly. It was no coincidence that Jesus chose this place to ask his famous question, "Who do people say that I am?" To ask there, in the shadow of power and politics, points to the question's importance and its implication. It would have been one thing for Jesus to ask this question in some quiet village in Galilee, but it's quite another matter to ask in Caesarville.

Probably not surprised by the answers – Moses, Elijah or another prophet – Jesus changes the question just enough to make it very personal. "Who do you say that I am?" In that instant, we experience a shift. This Sunday reading highlights a turning point in Mark's Gospel. Jesus would now set about the next phase of his mission. For it was now

time for the disciples to understand whom He was and what was to follow. In revealing these things, Jesus' disciples would learn their place in this mission as well.

It was not as easy of a question to answer. Most of the disciples were now deeply committed to this great teacher and healer AND most of them were prepared for a revolution either of politics or religion. The days to come would be confusing and few would understand the true implications until much later.

The Son of God, the Son of Man – he came among us and changed our lives for eternity. “Who do you say that I am?” This question is our question. The answer can be as simple or complicated as our lives make it. Together in the sacred writings of his life and the insights of the faithful before us, we learn of God's call to seek life abundant. We listen together in hopes to gain understanding, in hopes to follow his life by word and by example.

Where do we do this seeking? Where do we go to learn and share who we know Christ to be? Now we are back to location – for God is revealed in sanctuary, Sunday School classroom, Bible studies, and prayer. God is revealed at home, in mini-van, on the way to work or by the river's bank.

A friend shared a true story with me not long ago. Not long ago she and her two-year-old daughter were spending a busy week together taking care of many details as they settled into a new town and home. The days were filled with shopping and banking, with meetings and appointments. Whenever possible she would use a drive-thru at whatever business they were using, in order to keep them on schedule. Her daughter would often complain – tired of riding she wanted to go inside the buildings instead.

The week had ended and they came to Sunday morning. The daunting task of entering a new church was ahead and as they drove up, my friend stopped the car and hesitated – she was not sure she was ready to take this step. “Mom”, her daughter nudged, “we have to go inside. Churches don't have drive-thru-s!”

Location – we enter this space today surround by God's faithful of all ages. From the voices of our children, we are reminded that there will always be more to learn. “Who do you say I am?” – through this question we are invited to explore the many facets of God-among-us. As personal as this may seem, we must remember that our faith is known not only in word but also in action.

Location – wherever we go, God is with us. May our lives reflect the faith we profess – in thought, word, and deed. AMEN.