

Twenty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 27, 2023

“But who do you say that I am?”

Whenever couples come to me to begin preparations for their wedding, I always ask them why they want to marry the other person. And it really is life-affirming for me to hear them say wonderful things about each other. I love her more than anything . . . I can't imagine my life without him . . . She's the kindest person I have ever met . . . We were made for each other . . . He is SO good to me . . . She's my soul-mate.

It's hard to hear these kinds of things and not recognize the goodness of God and the gift of romantic love. Most of us hope for the day when we can say (and feel) these things about another person.

Sometimes, however, these sorts of things are said by future husbands and wives who have only been dating a short while (sometimes only for few months). The truth is, these types of engaged couples tend to say the exact same sorts of things that I hear from people who have been dating for many years.

And in these situations in which people who have only known each other a short while want to marry - I almost always question (in as kind a way as possible) whether or not they can truthfully assert these gushing statements about each other. “What makes you feel so confident that what you are saying is true?” I might say to them. Or more often, “Do you think you know the other person well enough to say these kinds of things about him (or her)?” Silently, I answer the question for them. “Of course not.” Naturally, it's hard to persuade couples into pushing their wedding down the road, until more time has passed, until they have spent enough time together to truly “know” the other person, and what they are getting into.

The truth is that most relationships are this way. It's only after spending a lot of time with someone can we discover who they are. As a matter of fact we need shared experiences with that person. We need to see them in various areas of their lives - work, school, play, romantic relationships and even how they handle themselves when they are angry. Early on in a relationship, we might HOPE that our initial instincts are true, that the person we are getting to know will be the person we expect to find. But we won't truly be able to say things about that person with any confidence until much more time has passed, until we have seen enough and heard enough and experienced enough.

“But who do you say that I am?”

So asks Jesus of his disciples as we heard from St. Matthew's gospel today. And as we know, Peter jumps in with his famous “answer”.

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

And in many ways, Peter is doing what all of us do. He comes to a conclusion about someone AFTER a good deal of time has passed, after seeing and hearing much from his friend, Jesus. He has already heard the Sermon on the Mount. He has heard all sorts of teachings from the mouth of Jesus, teachings spoken with a certain kind of authority. He has seen Jesus cleanse a leper, and heal a centurion's servant. He has seen Jesus calm a storm and heal a paralytic and heal two blind men and heal a woman with a hemorrhage. He even saw Jesus heal his own (Peter's) mother-in-law. All of these together helped Peter say those incredible words to Jesus' profound question.

My dear friends, we don't have that same “luxury”. We have not seen Jesus physically.

One of the great challenges of our life of faith is trying to resist the temptation to hold off judgment until something is “proved” to us. We, understandably, want all the evidence presented to us so that we can then

make up our minds about God and about this enigmatic person who lived two thousand years ago. We often want to have absolutely all the information, we want to have all the experiences, have all the facts.

We often want to know everything about Jesus BEFORE we decide who we believe him to be, and before we decide if we even want to follow him. In other words, we want to see all the things the disciples got to see - the healings, the profound speeches, the brilliant parables, the power over nature, the gentle spirit, the heartfelt compassion, the profound sense of fidelity to God. We want all of that before we can make a judgment.

But unfortunately, we don't have that same luxury.

You see, everyone who came after those first followers of Jesus, everyone who had to rely on the testimony of others and not their OWN eyes, has had to do the opposite of what we normally do in relationships. We have to decide who Jesus is for us without really seeing, without really knowing, without experiencing him in the physical way all our other relationships are formed. And it's only AFTER deciding who we believe this person Jesus to be, will we be then able to truly get to "know" him, truly get to "experience" him, truly get to "commune" with him, truly get to "hear his voice". It starts with our declaration of faith. It does not end with it.

And if we are able to sincerely and confidently and with a deep hope and trust be able to say those same words of Peter - "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," we might just start seeing "evidence" of God and the Lord Jesus and the Spirit all over this world. Even miracles - unexplainable manifestations of power and grace, are almost always visible only within the heart of, and through the eyes of a person who has already chosen to believe.

So let's start with faith in Jesus, and let God confirm our faith each and every day.