

EXODUS 1:8-2:10

PSALM 124

ROMANS 12:1-8

MATTHEW 16:13-20

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost; Twenty First Sunday in Ordinary
Time

August 27, 2023; Year A

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

Who Do You Think You Foolin?

After more than two thousand years we are still a work in progress, taking steps backward and forward in our hope of getting it right. As the scripture says about us individually, and I would presume corporately, “Beloved, we are God’s children now. What we will be has not yet been revealed” (I John 3:2a). Yes, presumably we are becoming more and more like Christ every day, day by day getting better at stewarding this ship. What we are is what we are but what we will be we are yet to be seen, never fully determined. While we have our feet firmly planted in two places, we are still evolving as a living, breathing communal organism. Yes, we are living our twenty-first century, postmodern reality, while operating out of the limited biblical information, the bonds and boundaries the first century followers of Jesus afforded us along with eventual, perhaps inevitable, dogmatic Church teaching that would follow as doctrinal pronouncements and creedal statements, some good and some not so much. Here we are! In fact, the more we learn the more confused we seem to become because the more divided we definitely get. Diversity is a great thing in its many forms, but I am not so sure about that when it comes to theology, different things to different people, leading to mass dysfunction, permanent schism on steroids, conflicts

without end. Amen and Amen! It seems like there are more denominational and nondenominational flavors than options at Starbucks! That, my friends is the opposite of ecumenism! Whatever became of “that they may all be one?” After all, it was the seeds of initial discontent between traditional Jews and Jewish proselytes who bought into the Jesus movement that spawned the creation of the early Church. The “followers of the way” as they were originally known back in the day, had to get out of the way. They had to go! They created the Church and then credited Jesus with its rocky formation. Jesus now gets the blame and praise for who and what we were and who and what we are. Frankly, in all honesty, in all candor, Jesus, the historical man from Nazareth just wanted to tweak, perhaps overhaul, to reform the faith tradition of his birth, to restore the luster to ancient Judaism, a religion he thought, like a long-tarnished pewter vase, had acquired too much patina, had become stagnant and stale, oppressive in so many ways. Jesus was Jewish. He was a Jew, committed to Torah and the cause, though he certainly tinkered with its concept and precepts. He never converted to himself, never wanted to be other than, never thought of himself, as anything other than Kosher, Judaic in every conceivable way. He attended synagogue and Temple, no church in sight. And yet the ecclesia is his legacy, wanted or not, and we are the ones left to try and figure it all out, striving to get it right, making sense of steeple life while hoping and praying, that as a part of a local missional outpost, right here, right now, we make a difference in our own lives, our local community, all the while audaciously aspiring to change the world for the better, making it a more lovingly gracious, mercifully peaceful, socially just global village. And with that mouthful we are off and running this morning.

We are all familiar with our story from Matthew today. Jesus had been teaching, more like lecturing, waxing eloquent as he got on the high horse of his soap box, admonishing his disciples for another in a series of failures to launch, to understand what he thought they

should have long comprehended by now. Surely at this point they would understand, they would get it as if getting it was easy to get! Suddenly, Jesus shifts the conversation, asking his disciples “Who do people say that I am?” They all huddled together as they quietly, perhaps loudly, discussed the matter, no doubt hoping this time to cobble together a right answer, avoiding another round of disappointing rebukes. They answer, finding consensus, naming the usual suspects, “Some say John the Baptist,” that would have been an interesting trick based on timing, John not yet cold in the grave, “others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the other prophets,” just to be safe, to hedge their bets, to cover all the bases. All these historic figures good options making for good guesses. But they already knew that Jesus was not one of these monumental figures, that he was different, a rabbi unlike any before, we would suggest, after him. Evidently, Jesus points to Peter, calls out Peter. Of course, it would be Peter. It is always Peter. Even when Peter does not speak up, he is still singled out, no doubt Jesus attempting to get this always outspoken disciple’s attention. It is as if Jesus hoped, sometimes in vain, that he could get through to Peter’s, somehow penetrating at a deeper level his psyche, his intuitive inner being, continuing to mold him into a leader, into something and someone useful. With the upmost of confidence, as if answering the final Jeopardy question, Peter proudly and boldly answers, head held high like the star pupil, the head of the class, the anointed apostolic valedictorian, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!” Exclamation point! You know how I love them! Good job! Good answer! Well done! Now shut up and quit while you are ahead. Savor the moment! Jesus is thrilled, “Happy are you,” I love that phrase with the word “happy,” Simon son of Jonah,” invoking Peter’s formal name as a worthy complement as if he had just graduated, his name now listed for all to see, “because no human has shown this to you. I tell you that you are Peter, and I will build my church on this rock,” making a play on Peter’s mixed metaphor nickname. “The gates of the underworld,” that would be

hell, “will not be able to stand against it. I will give you the keys of the realm of heaven,” like the keys to the city on steroids. Anything you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven.” He then ordered silence, that the disciples tell no one that he was the Christ. Shhhhhhhh!

As always there is more to the story with Peter, as per usual, the Rock not able to contain himself and suffering another case of foot-in-mouth disease, earning another scolding, head bowed, taking it like a man. Jesus then declares to the disciples that, now that they have this essential intel, this most important information, that now they need to know that they are on a death watch, a death march, that the humble but very vocal rabbi would be killed, that he must suffer and die because of this peasant movement he is leading, perhaps the following starting to get out of hand, out-of-control, and, worst of all, garnering Rome’s unwanted attention. From that day forward this litany of impending death would become part of the narrative, the new normal, part of the daily grind of Jesus’ teaching and preaching, not a threat but a promise. Peter, as Peter is wont to do, thinking he is now on a roll and seeking to impress the master with even more of his wit and wisdom, the apostle declared for all to hear that he would have none of it, balderdash, launching into a tirade of sorts, rebuking the rabbi and swearing basically over his dead body that no harm would come to the Nazarene. Well, Jesus returns rebuke for rebuke and tells Peter, not so fast, and calls him Satan, yes, the “S” word, scolding him for his impromptu, awkward soliloquy, his spontaneous talk-back live moment as if he suddenly came down with a case of temporary insanity, telling Simon to “stand by and stand back,” uh, I mean stand down, to get behind him. In other words, get with the program, lead, follow, or get out of the way, figuratively and literally, “the way!” What we have here is a failure to communicate but that failure is on the receiving end, not with the one delivering the unpleasant news, the unwanted message. We now have a conundrum on steroids, knowing that a showdown for these ages was coming and

coming quickly, a conflict in the making, and yes, the disciples would one day join this dreaded death march, a torturous martyrdom awaiting them all, their crosses, just like chickens, coming home to roost. It was a haunting prospect, a terror that would happen time and time again, repeated over and over and over. The question for us as always is what do these things mean? What do they mean for those of us who are so far removed, so distant, from events that are surely, as much, perhaps more mythical than literal, even though we have no doubt that reality was enmeshed throughout the story.

There are many angles that I could take with this story today, many interpretive possibilities abounding, all of them offering words of challenge, encouragement, or comfort. The word that I would like to convey in our sermonic moments together this morning is the reminder that church in all its many forms is never meant to be easy and never was, a misconception of the highest order. No, that does not mean that this hopefully holy enterprise is a source of drudgery and misery, consumed with guilt, shame, and judgement. Sadly, that is still the way of many churches, poor unsuspecting, or perhaps willing, souls getting beat up every Sunday, verbally abused in the pulpit, every week, always reminded that they are damnable sinners barely avoiding the eternal fires of hell. Guilt based, not grace based! The difference is huge! No, we are lucky in this freedom loving nation, never shadowed with the threats of persecution, the terror and torture, that consumed our forebears in the faith, many of them executed as martyrs through a host of excruciating means, all for entertainment, all of which we know well. No, today's Gospel musings are a reminder that being the church together, that building community, takes a lot of work and yes, any kind of growing pain is pain producing. No pain! No gain! Yes, church, a human institution, hopefully led by the Spirit, can be messy, very messy!

Those who seek a church that is always fun and games, kicks and giggles, are the churches that build closed cocoons, insular communities offering safety nets from the outside world, advocating as little interaction with worldly people, worldly stuff, in as much as possible. Rarely if ever controversial, never a negative word is hurled their way because they say nothing that would attract attention of the negative variety, no condemnation, nor rebuke, ever on the radar. The reason Jesus was executed by crucifixion as a common criminal, his disciples obediently following in line, lemmings not, is because Jesus stood for principles that defied the way things were for what Paul called the “powers and principalities” of this world. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Many churches, in an attempt to become more appealing, have removed all images of the cross, the symbol of the faith, now considered irrelevant, supposed outdated vestiges of a bygone era, eradicating all semblances of perceived negativity from their altars, steeples, and every other part of their edifices. I am just not so sure about that. Well, maybe I am! The message in Jesus’ mission and ministry, the galvanizing pronouncements in his preaching and teaching, brought the boil of corruption to the surface, both by religious and political authorities, their toxic societal infection needing lancing in the worst way. Jesus was a divisive political figure. Jesus dared upset the status quo in which those who had the power, always including their compounding wealth, especially through the greed of their oppressive taxation, payoffs at every turn, maintained their status and standing, never a risk of losing their temporal reward. The communal dynamics were the way they were, and in way too many instances, are the way they still are. “That’s just the way it is,” as Phil Collins first sang back in 1990. And, as we all know, that is not the way it needs to be, not the way it needs to continue, not the way humanity needs to move forward. It is not about capitalism, communism, socialism, or any other “ism”, but it is about everyone having the basics, afforded a God-given and God-graced piece of the pie!

The prophetic word for our hospitably welcoming and inclusive congregation is, echoing the profoundly provocative words of the late Georgia Representative, John Lewis, civil rights ikon, as we honor this weekend's march on Washington, DC, a continuation not a commemoration, that we should always be about stirring up "good trouble!" Perhaps that is a way of reminding us that we are called to take up the cross, our cross, and sometimes that means carrying the crosses for those who cannot carry their own! Church, whatever this system of evolutionary production became and is becoming, should always be a Church shaking the foundations, as the late theologian Paul Tillich once wrote. We should be stirring the civic pot, yes, the straw that stirs the drink! We have a witness to proclaim, a testimony to shout from the proverbial rooftop, a sobering message that challenges the structures and systems that by design keep the proverbial gerbil wheel turning. So much of our social injustice is the result of systemic issues that are sadly denied by a huge segment of the population of these United States. You know the list by heart. They are etched in our memory! Yes, the list is long! We must continually be about the social justice work by checking each one off, each harmful item that leaves a scar on our civil aspirations, yes, one by one until they are gone, obliterated from the landscape now so polluted by inequity and inequality. As many are wont to do, we can play a game of let's pretend and say that these battles are over, or to steal a new subtle image, that they never really existed or were not as bad as we were led to believe, that these issues have been addressed and dispatched, that the victory has been won, but we know in our spirit that this is not so, far from the case, and that we have even taken steps backward.

So, folks, here you go, in conclusion. Remember this and these! As many as you can! "God is still speaking," so, "never place a period where God has placed a comma! Jesus didn't reject anyone and neither do we! Science is real! Black lives matter! No human is illegal!

Love is love! Women's rights are human rights! Kindness is everything! No matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here!" And to bring it all home! "Be the church! Protect the environment! Care for the poor! Forgive often! Reject racism! Fight the powerless! Share earthly and spiritual resources! Embrace diversity! Love God! Enjoy this life!" Or as Luther supposedly once said, "sin boldly that grace may abound!" Yes, cliches all, but cliches pregnant, overflowing, with meaning, packed with a whole lot of punch! Do as many of these things as you are able as a congregation and you will not only get attention, even attracting some like minds along the way, but you will get pushback. Some people will not like this message. They will get mad, even pissed off! So be it! If the Church is to survive in this contemporary, postmodern, age, and even remotely overcome the odds with any modicum of success, daring to dream that it would thrive, the ecclesia must call forth its inner protestations, even going back in time, recalling the radical echoes from the sixteenth century birth pains of the radically transformational Protestant Reformation, preached from fearless, bold and courageous reformers brave to their end, change agents, paradigm breakers and "reframers," who were anything but polite. Yes, let us ever be "the Church reformed, always reforming!" Good luck! Godspeed! God bless!

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, and sustains and calls us to be the Church, figuring it all out as we go! Amen and amen.