

August 24, 2014 You Are the Christ

A banquet feast...the massive table is full of rich food. Where do I begin?  
Did you hear? Dunkin Donuts are coming to Minnesota.  
You enter the donut shop and your eyes get big, and your face pressed against the glass. So many choices...so little time.  
A state fair of wondrous sites, where you can go from one to the next for days.  
Rides and animals and shows and concerts and food and...  
A huge farmer's market, with so many different varieties.  
If it can be grown, you will find it there.

That's what the archeologists have found at Caesarea Philippi.  
Temple upon temple upon temple honoring the many different gods of the ancient world.  
It was a long way from Capernaum and the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus and the disciples spent most of their years together.  
It was a long way from Jewish country.  
But that's where Jesus took them, to Caesarea Philippi...  
to the smorgasbord of religions.  
That's where Jesus asked them the question of all questions.

I've been thinking this week...what are the religious options of the modern day?  
I've become convinced; it's not Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, or Lutheran.  
It's not that.  
Those in reality are the same answer...those are part of the same choice.  
Instead, what are the values that really challenge the Christian Faith?  
What are the things that lay claim to our hearts?  
If we are not worshipping God on Sunday morning, how are we spending our free time?  
If it is not God, to what are we devoting ourselves?  
Remember how Martin Luther said it: "That to which your heart clings is truly your god."  
Remember how St. Paul put it in our Epistle reading: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."  
Remember how Jesus said it: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."  
So where do we place our hearts if we do not give them to God?

A hundred different places.

There are so many options for our time, our energy, our money, our hearts.

There is a plethora of possibilities, a cornucopia of choices.

Our religious options are many.

They come from our work, our community, our families, our recreations, our hobbies, our possessions, our preferences, ourselves, our...fill in the blank.

In the farmers' market of faith, what values/truths/principles will you strive to follow?

In the candy shop of choices, what do you find the sweetest?

In the state fair of delights, on what will your heart be centered?

The many different temples of Caesarea Philippi form the backdrop to one of the most pointed questions of Scripture: Who do you say that I am?

Surrounded by the different options: the Greek gods, the Roman gods, the Egyptian gods, the Syrian gods, Jesus asks the disciples, Who do YOU say that I am?

Wow...that's the question.

It is THE question in the first century and the twenty-first century.

Jesus' asks the question: What's in your heart?

To what are you devoted?

How do you spend what God has given you?

The answer was spoken for the whole church by Simon Peter:

"You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior, the Son of the Living God."

What an incredible pronouncement of faith!

Who forgives our sins? Jesus.

Who liberates us from bondage? Jesus.

Who gives us sight when we are blind? Jesus.

Who breathes life into our dead spirits? Jesus.

Peter said, "You are the Messiah."

I especially like the phrase Mathew names as part of Peter's witness, that you do not find in the parallel versions in Mark or Luke.

Peter calls Jesus: the Son of the Living God. The Living God.

The Holy One who creates life.

The Holy One who sustains life.

The Holy One who restores life.

You, Jesus, are the presence of the Living God.

When it comes right down to it, what is the one thing that makes Christians Christian?

The answer is not...potluck dinners, cross necklaces, or preachers with charismatic personalities.

The thing that makes us who we are is who Jesus is.

Jesus Christ is Christianity.

Other faiths have love...have beliefs about the good and true.

Only Christianity has Jesus.

If God had only given us a book, then we would have the Bible...

But we wouldn't be Christians.

We would be another noble philosophy of life, a system of ethical virtues.

But what God did, we believe, is to come to us in the flesh...

As a Jew from Nazareth named Jesus...

Or closer to the Hebrew, Joshua, meaning God saves.

We believe that the peculiar way God saves, gets to us, and gets us, is Jesus.

It is our astounding claim that, when we look at the Jewish carpenter's son,

who was born, lived briefly, died violently in his thirties,

and rose from the dead unexpectedly, we see as much of God as we hope to see.

We can sympathize with people who look at Jesus...

And see only a noble teacher...

Or only a great moral example....

Or even a wild-eyed revolutionary.

After all, from the very beginning, who Jesus was, what he was about,

Was far from self-evident.

Jesus did not directly say who he was.

He did not walk around with a sign on his back, saying, "Son of God."

Messiahs were supposed to have power, were supposed to take charge, to set things right, to fix all our problems.

Jesus refused to stiff-arm anybody into following him.

He refused to dominate or to take up arms.

He just stood in the marketplace of lifestyle, values, and principles, and asked, Who do you say that I am?

Among all the choices of life, will you follow me? Do I warrant your devotion?

Peter confessed our faith: You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

Christianity is not primarily adherence to a set of great ideals, an ethics.  
Christianity is not a set of great ideas, a philosophy.  
Christianity is a way of life, a way of walking with Jesus, a relationship.  
It's like the man who stands before the altar and announces to all:  
of all the people in the world, this one standing beside me is the one for me.  
It's like the mother who watches the stream of children exit the school;  
and when hers appears, she smiles and is thankful.  
Jesus is the one who gives us life.  
He shows us what love is all about.  
He helps us taste the grace of God.  
That's why we worship him.  
That's why we put him at the center of our lives.  
Food for the journey of life.