

17 Pentecost

Isaiah 50:4-9a

Proper 19

Psalm 116:1-8

16 September 2018

James 3: 1-12

But who do you say I am?

Mark 8:27-38

Who do people say that I am?"

And they answered him, " John the Baptist; and others Elijah; and still others one of the prophets."

"But who do you say that I am?"

When do you fix a leaky roof?

When it's not raining.

When do you fix a home septic system?

Before you have a big problem.

We've owned the old house for a number of years. Since we're out in the country it has a septic system and we've never had a big problem, yet. The bathtub doesn't drain well; sometimes the commode gets stopped up. Mainly I don't know where the septic tank is so if we had a problem we could deal with it.

So this summer I said we're going to solve the problem even if it means a new septic tank and system. So I started. Such a system is not cheap and the process is involved. The more I got involved the more I realized I needed to locate the old tank. After listening to me complain a plumber said, "I can locate the old tank." I had him out the next day.

Plumbers are high tech, too. He moved the commode to one side then snaked a cable with a camera at the end down the drain so we could see the interior of the pipe as it moved through the system. As it did it registered the distance.

At 28 feet we could see the camera entering the chamber of the septic tank. We rushed outside, grabbed shovels, and started digging where all this high tech plumber technology indicated the tank would be.

I don't know whose shovel "clunked" against the top of a concrete tank first but it was as if we had reached a pot of gold.

Of course to say the very least it was NOT a pot of gold that we had reached although the savings from not having to install a brand new system are not inconsequential.

The next day I had the man who services septic tanks at the place – to install an access cover so that periodically the tank could be serviced – and we would know where the tank is.

He had serviced the system at another house for me so I knew him – but that was about it. I had wondered what sort of person would be in this type of business.

It's one of those types of work you wouldn't care to be in particularly but are glad someone does it.

As he worked he wanted to talk. I've found that sometimes the kindest thing a person can do in such situations is just listen. Really listen. Listen honestly, attentively. And so I did.

And in his talking he shared that he had suffered a great hurt as a child. He isn't as old as I but he's not that far from his retirement years. Even though he had been the one hurt in that situation his siblings never wanted to have anything to do with him. As a young man he had moved away from his home state and started over.

And then he started telling me about another job he had done recently.

On that job he had located the tank, drained it, removed the drainage hose and was about to cover the tank. It was a warm day, the sun was out, near mid-day, and he happened to glance down into the tank before he closed it up. And of all things there was a little turtle in the bottom of the tank looking up at him and into the sunlight, looking up into the sun. And the little turtle

seemed fascinated to see this thing he had never seen before – the sun, light, the light of day.

And so fascinated was this hard-boiled man by this little turtle he reached down into the tank with one of his tools and picked up this little turtle and took him home with him.

I've thought about that man, his story – and his story of the little turtle who discovered light.

Why would he have been so interested in telling that story?

A couple of answers come to mind. Frankly, most of the time he works alone. Seldom does he have an audience to share the day to day happenings of his job. Given the nature of his job it would take a person with a pretty strong stomach to listen to too much of the details of his job. So for once he had an audience – me.

And something about this story – this little incident encountered in the routine of another day of work like every other day – spoke to him.

Something about something, someone, some living creature, caught in great darkness then just out of seeming happenstance encountering, discovering light – great light.

Maybe the man had lived in great darkness – his conversation – hints that he dropped – suggested as much. Maybe he still is in great darkness.

And one day on the job, a job seeming like any other job, he encounters something, a little living creature also caught in great darkness, yet discovering great light – and freedom from darkness.

We are not unfamiliar with darkness.

Maybe darkness in the form of one of those insidious diseases that rob one of memory, of recollection, of even recognizing their own loved ones and friends.

Maybe darkness in the form of one of those addictions that rob a man or a woman of the will to do the right thing for others, for loved ones, even for oneself, and enslaving one to appetites for drink or for drugs or for “highs” that do not last and are followed by pains of withdrawal, the hurt looks and hard words of loved ones and friends and great unhappiness.

Maybe darkness in the form of incarceration – jail – prison - locked in a place where in the midst of crowds of people you do not know or even want to know you are in the darkness of aloneness and fear – the unending punishment of every day being like every other day – and every day as grey and hopeless and dark as the day preceding.

I go on indefinitely listing the dark places that many encounter in our world today. Possibly even dark places with which some of us have more than a passing acquaintance.

In our Gospel reading today Jesus asks some of his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” He barely gives them time to reply when He then asks them a follow-up question that sears directly to the heart of their being: “Who do you say I am?”

And if we have been listening, really listening – we know the question is really directed to me, to you.

We wish He would look away, or ask the one sitting next to us.

But he doesn't. He's looking directly at me, directly at you.

How do I answer? How do you answer?

Maybe we might even try to bluff an answer, “Well, I'm sitting here in a pew here in St. Luke's.....”

And He looks at us with eyes that tell us He wants a real answer.

Maybe the real answer is that when we are with a loved one, or one of the family of our church, or even a complete stranger lost in the darkness of those insidious diseases of memory and recollection and we share the familiar words of our faith, or just of friendship, and a handshake or just kind touch, that

let's them know that even in the darkness of their illness they are not alone, they are loved.

Or in the darkness behind prison walls we extend the hand of friendship of God's love; they are not alone, they are loved.

Maybe the answer to Christ's question is that with God's love in our hearts, we will be the light – in our imperfect and fumbling ways – we will be His light to those lost in darkness around us – and in so doing declare that He is the Light, the Messiah, the One who brings meaning, purpose, and love to life itself.

Amen.