

Message for September 13th

Just two days ago our nation remembered the events of September 11th, 2001. Perhaps you remember where you were when you first heard about the events taking place on that fateful day. People often do. Our older folks may remember what they were doing when they first heard of the attack on Pearl Harbor, or the assassination of JFK. Then we had the Challenger explosion and others more recently that more of us remember.

On Tuesday, September 11, 2001, I was at home getting ready to go with my wife to a doctor visit. I can remember first hearing the news about a plane hitting one of the twin towers and thinking how could a plane go off course like that. But I soon found out what was really going on.

I also remember how my home church was filled that next Sunday. After the pastor made announcements including prayers for our country, a man from the congregation went to the front and held the United States flag. I don't remember if we sang anything or what happened next. Then I remember reading how church attendance surged for a while across our country. I say for a while because it was only for a while, then things returned to normal as far as church attendance.

For some reason today's scripture made me think of how church attendance went up for a few weeks after that fateful day 25 years ago , but I'll get to that in a few minutes after a little background on our scripture.

We hear how this group came to the region of Caesarea Philippi and probably don't understand the significance of this area. This region north of the Sea of Galilee was home to many pagan temples and idols. The area had been the home of ancient Syrian Baal worship. Bible scholars have found there to be at least 14 different temples to different deities. There was also a great building of white marble built to Caesar. Later Philip Herod's son changed the name of the area to Caesarea and added his own name Philippi to distinguish it from Caesarea on the Mediterranean. From a distance one would be reminded of the authority and power of Rome.

It is here in the midst of temples and worship of other gods, this homeless, penniless traveling teacher with 12 ordinary men following asks the question, “Who do people say the son of man is?” This in a way, broke the ice to the next question He wanted to see answered.

The common view of the day was that He was one of the great prophets who had come back to life. John the Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah are specifically mentioned along with any others. This would have been quite an honor. The prophets mentioned were held in very high esteem and looked upon a forerunner of the Anointed One of God.

Now that He had established that, Jesus gets to the heart of the matter. “But who do *you* say I am?” Perhaps there was a delay in response, perhaps the others weren’t sure what to say, perhaps they were waiting for Peter to speak up first since he usually did. His response goes much above the common view of the day. His answer means he understands Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus is the Christ, the Anointed one of God.

This is a breakthrough. Finally, Jesus must have thought, these guys are starting to get it. There is much more to this episode. Jesus is thrilled with Peter’s answer, the next few verses tell of how the church will be built on the rock of such a confession and more.

Today, though, let’s put ourselves in the disciples’ place. Actually we are already there. We are followers of Christ and here we are in this time and place. Although we are not in the region of Caesarea Philippi with pagan temples all around us we are still heavily influenced by our secular world. Let us apply that question Jesus asks to ourselves. “Who do you say I am?” Or better yet, “Who am I in your life?”

Many other world religions view Jesus a great moral person or teacher. Some view him as a spiritual therapist or symbol of goodness. Still others view Jesus as a comfort in times of struggle. Others will acknowledge Jesus as the son of God and how they believe in Him, but then it stops there. Others believe and live

accordingly with many aspects of their lives following what the gospel teaches but not surrendering certain parts.

We see a lot of different approaches to the answer to such a question. As I think back to the weeks after September 11th, 2001, I have concluded there was a short window where many Americans felt we needed God's help to overcome this enemy that had caught us off guard. As time went on, this faded as we relied only on ourselves and our earthly wisdom. I sometimes wonder how bad things will have to get before we realize how we just don't follow what Jesus taught.

Yet there is hope. Peter's confession is good for us to study today. You and I know many who are totally committed to Jesus and every aspect of their lives reflect His presence in their hearts. And that is the challenge, to be totally committed.

This summer I was lucky enough to visit someone I just described. When I was a junior and senior in high school I did some tutoring at the elementary school. I got to know the principal there. Even though he was like 15 years older than me, which at the time seemed really old, we became friends. He was what people used to call a confirmed bachelor. He played the organ at his church and was very devoted to it. I remember how he carried a picture of Jesus in his wallet that was visible right when he opened it up. I heard he was in the local care center and went to visit. In my experience visiting care centers I always try to prepare myself for anything. Most of my trips are pleasant and welcoming, but I have had times when I'll be brushed aside or told I tried that praying thing and it didn't work for me. Well he was there because of some physical limitations and his mind was as sharp as ever. I found he is still involved with his church and as active as he can be. We had a nice conversation and before leaving he asked for my address. Just last week I received two copies of this book called Breath of the Almighty by Shay McNally along with a note encouraging me in my ministry. I marvel at his commitment to Christ and will always remember his example.

While it would be quite difficult to live up to his life of devotion, I'd like to share some thoughts about an answer one might give to the question Jesus asks of all of us. I thought of the great response Thomas after he touched the risen Christ. in John 20:28, "My Lord and my God!"

This morning I included the UCC statement of faith as part of our worship. We read the original statement from 1959. It refers to Jesus as "our crucified and risen Lord." In the revised statement the word "Lord" has been dropped not as a rejection of divinity but because of the meaning it carries for many.

While I understand how some cannot separate such a title from an earthly ruler I think it is a fitting description. If one realizes the definition of the word is someone or something having power, influence, or authority, we see how Jesus should be the Lord of our lives.

Now this is not to be confused with the power, influence, or authority our spouse may have over us. I guess one time a guy calls his scientist friend. "What are you doing?" He asks. The friend answers "I'm in the middle a project with hydro thermal behavior of porcelain glass and metals under a controlled high-pressured environment." His friend did not understand so he said, "Can you explain that so I understand?" And the friend answers, "My wife is making me wash the dishes since I haven't called anyone to get the dishwasher fixed."

If we take this thought of Jesus as Lord, we can understand that this title is a declaration of Jesus' divine authority and sovereignty over all creation. This leads one to trust His leadership, and live in obedience. It shapes ones identity, purpose, and daily choices, reflecting His character and reign in one's life. This is something that doesn't waver or fade, it stays with a person throughout the good and tough times.

It's good every so often to look at our faith and reevaluate where we might be. Sometimes a recommitment is in order. This morning I would challenge all of us to answer the same question Jesus asked of His disciples. Peter's confession and our words from Paul in Colossians give us valuable insight.

When one is firmly rooted in Christ we put things in their proper place. We must continue to ask and answer Jesus' question: Who is Jesus for us? Like Peter may we confess, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." To make that confession today is not to be taken lightly. It's an act of loyalty, courage and discipleship. It means Christ is the Lord of our decisions, Lord of our desires, Lord of our relationships, Lord of our justice, Lord of our forgiveness, Lord of our past, and the Lord of our future.

May we, by the grace of God, have such a commitment. Amen.