

August 21, 2011

SCRIPTURE: Hebrew Bible: Exodus 1: 8-12
Epistle: Romans 12: 1-8
Gospel: Matthew 16: 13-20

MEDITATION: Did Jesus Mean US?

Have you ever pondered this question? When Jesus was preaching and teaching, do you think that he meant to be talking to US? You and Me. Jesus came to bring the good news to all of humanity. He knew what he was doing. He knew that his message was for all people and for all eternity so he MUST have meant to be talking to US. All the generations that have followed, one after another, through the ages since Jesus walked on this earth – Jesus was speaking and teaching and preaching to all of these. Yep, Jesus did mean US! Jesus always means us! It is up to us whether we recognize this and act upon it.

When Jesus asked his disciples, who do you think I am? He was asking us as well. Peter gave the right answer – “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And that made all the difference. Because he gave the right answer he was rewarded! Jesus gave him the WHOLE AND ENTIRE responsibility for the coming church. WOW, how would you and I feel if we believed this responsibility was given to us as well? Well – it was – like it or not, if we want to believe all the good and easy things Jesus said to us about love, and grace and peace, then we must also believe this responsibility was for us as well. If we believe that Jesus is the Christ, the very Son of God, as much of God as we ever hope to see, then we must conform to Christ and take this responsibility to our very heart and soul. If we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, then we must live as if he is the Messiah. We must not only believe that he is the Christ, we must obey Christ as if he were the Christ, the Son of God. The responsibility for the church and for how we live must be right where Jesus meant it to be –US!

William Willimon tells a story of a faithful Christian who trained and studied and lived in the States during the 1960's. He watched how the Christian church behaved during the time of the Civil Rights Movement, and he became disillusioned and left the church. He became a “sort of Christian”, but one who didn't actually practice Christianity, He stayed a believer but he stopped being a “doer”. One day he met and was having a conversation with a woman from the Soviet bloc. She said, “I'm an atheist. Tell me – what difference does your belief in God make in the way you vote, the way you spend your money? Tell me, when is the last time that you did something because you stopped and asked yourself, “What does God want me to do in this case?” This once faithful Christian was stunned. He realized that even though he believed like a believer, he lived like an atheist. The story ends with the statement that this stunning moment of honest recognition for him eventually led him back to a vibrant Christian faith. Where do you and I find ourselves in this story? When Jesus was speaking to US and telling US what was required to be a follower, did we take it in and realize that being this follower would make a whole lot of difference to how we lived our lives. I wonder?

Let's go back a moment to the story in the Hebrew Bible. I love the book of Exodus. It is panoramic – full of intrigue, victory and defeat and incredible stories of human good and human evil. Who doesn't love a good story – especially one that teaches us something about the human condition? In the story today we hear about the “evil” Pharaoh, who did not know about Joseph. The really significant thing to know about this Pharaoh is that he did not know God. He only knew his own human desires and his bent for control and oppression of the Israelites. He was happy to have them as slaves, to use them for his own purposes and to abuse them to make himself more powerful. He had one problem, the Israelites were multiplying and the Pharaoh was afraid that they would outnumber the Egyptians and cause a shift in power. So he ordered that every male Israelite child born should be put to death at birth. He ordered the midwives to do this. You need to notice that this Pharaoh did not seem to be afraid of the females. They were considered to be of no consequence and to be easily controlled and used. This was maybe the Pharaoh's greatest mistake in thinking, because it was in fact the women who foiled his plan. Now an order from a Pharaoh is meant to be obeyed. OR ELSE! But miracle of miracle's the midwives found the courage to disobey him and they let the boy babies live. A small group of women defied the Pharaoh and the story goes on to tell of how other women were also courageous enough to save the life of Moses who would ultimately be the one to lead the Israelites out of slavery. What a great story! It only takes a few courageous women to change the intent of an evil Pharaoh!

This story was in my mind as I was reading a wonderful book this week. Kay told me about it, and although the other day when I was in the book store, getting books for my grandson's birthday, I thought I would just find it to read later. Big mistake, because I bought it and can hardly put it down. The book is entitled Sarah's Key and is the story of July, 1942 in Paris when the roundup and deportation of Jews was ordered by the German occupiers. Ordinary every day Parisians stood silently by while thousands of men, women and children were torn from their lives and homes, treated with incredible brutality and ultimately sent to their deaths in Auchwitz. I had not heard of this event before, and what disturbed me in this story is that it was the ordinary French citizen and police that collaborated with the Germans to allow this to happen. France was a predominately Christian country in those days. Many of them gained by this deportation as Jewish homes and possessions were taken over with ease. Ordinary every day people, just like you and I, justified what was happening because it would benefit them. I haven't reached the end of the book yet, so I don't know the outcome, but one very brave 10 year old girl, risks her life time and time again, to escape the camp to return to Paris to free her 4 year old brother whom she locked in a hiding place to protect him on the night of the roundup. Along the way some ordinary citizens appalled by what had happened, especially to the Jewish children, aided her. Where do you imagine yourself in the story? I can't tell you the end because I don't know it yet – a part of me doesn't want to know the end – I want to go on reading about the incredible bravery of one little girl, motivated by great love and the few good people who helped her. I want to believe that their will be a happy ending. I want to believe that good always overcomes evil. I want to believe that followers of Christ, Christians, would ultimately remember who they were and stop this human tragedy.

For me all good stories teach us something. Reminds us who we are and how we should be. Paul speaks to the people in the epistle to remind them who they are and who they are following. Together the body of Christ can be the difference in the world. It takes each part to make the whole. Paul urges the people to not conform to the way the world is, not to give in but to be transformed by the renewing of their minds, by remembering what their responsibility is as followers of Christ, and to use their varied gifts to bring about a world which God desires. I am a prophet, most ministers are. I am constantly talking to you, and to myself, about justice, and how God wants us to be as humans. I have been taught to take this role, and I believe, called by God to live this role to the best of my ability. Others amongst us serve others with great love and diligence. Some dedicate their time and effort in teaching and loving our children. Some share their talents to enrich our worship. Others quietly encourage and with gentle presence and kindness, give us hope in our work. Some amongst us are leaders who try to govern us as church with wisdom and perseverance.

Which are you? Don't look to the person sitting next to you, but ask yourself, "What is my role?" What gift have I been given because I profess to be a follower of Christ and how do I use those gifts?" Each one of us must ask ourselves this honest question. Will I be the one to stand with courage in the face of evil or will I forget the difference that being a follower of the Messiah is meant to make in how I live my life. There are all sorts of reasons for what we think and how we act. Think of Christianity, and our life in the church, as a lifetime training in learning how to ask, "Do I have a specifically biblical or particularly Christian reason for how I'm thinking and how I'm living." Jesus is speaking and calling each one of us. Jesus is talking to US. Jesus believes in US even when we stumble and fall and make mistakes. Jesus enlisted an ordinary, limited person like Peter to walk the way with him. Peter believed in Jesus but Jesus also believed in Peter. The Rock, the one on whom the church would be built. Jesus believes in you and me. He expects us to work in the church, and to work in the world on behalf of the church.

JESUS DID INDEED MEAN US! AMEN