

Preaching Notes for September 20, 2009 Sermon
Personal Responsibility
The Rev. Michael Love

Scripture Reading by Rev. Laurie McHugh

VIDEO : FUMC congregants answer the question : "Who do you say that Jesus is?" during coffee fellowship on Sept 6

VIDEO TAG LINE : Identifying Jesus. Who do you say Jesus is?

Weren't those great responses? What a great range of ideas and thinking! And I wasn't sure I'd get any takers. Because I'm not always so sure that question—who do you say Jesus is—seems very urgent against the backdrop of the many other questions of the day.

But over the years maturity of faith has come to be measured by the work of coming to some kind of answer to that very question...an answer that is meaningful to us and that is live-able in a just and sustaining way. A committed articulation of *Jesus' identity* is a significant part of the work of discipleship....a part of our responsibility to engage the issues and questions that surround *our identity* as Christians. I don't believe we can do one without the other. *We identify Jesus to work out our own identity as Christians.* Moving through that work is something that takes *prayer, study, prayer, community, prayer, service, the sacraments of the church* and did I mention *prayer*. In the Methodist tradition John Wesley called these tools, the Means of Grace.

My challenge today is how to speak about personal responsibility and not sound preachy. I really want to share something that we overlook often and that's the idea that Jesus empowers us for the work of being adult, mature, spiritually fit and accountable, as well as strong in the world. I don't preach a gospel of prosperity, I believe in many ways Jesus calls us to risk poverty. But I do preach a gospel of strength and well-being in the midst of all the realities of our lives. I

believe Jesus wants you healthy. Do you believe that?

And healthy in a way that doesn't mean you or I are perfect specimens of humankind on any level. I mean spiritually healthy so that you are able to respond and engage the world around you in Christian witness.

Text : In Eugene Petersen's translation, *The Message*, the subject header that goes with today's text says "Don't Run From Suffering" Running from suffering, that is precisely what we do. We don't want to suffer from boredom, hunger, loneliness. How healthy is that? Well, on the face of it, it looks great! Less suffering, no stress, more health? Except when avoidance turns into an anxious-making life-style that creates more suffering than the actual suffering we're fleeing.

You know, sometimes we just have to be antsy, and impatient, and cranky, and just wait it out. It's not so easy to do. It takes practice. It takes a kind of maturity to do it.

Henri Nouwen, the Catholic theologian and founder of the L'Arche Community, stressed that there is an important difference between loneliness and solitude. He challenges us to find in times of alone-ness, an opportunity for quiet connection with God, instead of our more usual panic of isolation, boredom, and self-doubt. We could do well to develop our spiritual muscles through exercise so that we don't flee suffering so desperately.

Story : I had a hard time getting used to the idea that Youth Camp was going to be great. I missed home before I even went to the church parking lot for the ride up to Youth Camp, up to Camp Colby. I was a mess. What's interesting here though is that I was a mess *mostly* before the actual camping experience. I was at camp less than 12 hours when I realized how great camp was going to be. My cabin counselor was a college student from Ghana, and he spoke with an elegant and exotic British-inflected accent. He told us hair-raising

and marvelous stories about being a boy in Ghana, on a continent that most of us had only barely begun to know of. I saw wild animals in the woods and met kids from far away places. We learned new skills and new pranks. Had I successfully run from the suffering of a few hours of missing home, I would have missed out on an adventure that I now would not trade for anything.

Now, not all suffering is like this, to be sure. I don't ever mean to minimize or spiritualize the real suffering of dispossessed and struggling people. In fact, it is in the lives of those who suffer that I have most often seen a deep and abiding understanding of who Jesus is. So, for me, most of the suffering that I see, is as transitory as my case of homesickness before Youth camp. Most suffering that I have seen is a real-enough-indeed-need for healing *combined with* an opportunity to know God deeply.

Story : KGO Story : Do the times we live in encourage us to be available for the discomfort of suffering. Are we encouraged or discouraged to be responsible? The times certainly encourage us to be demanding, but responsible? I don't know. KGO : Law show. What I Like about Len Tillem is that sometimes he gives you advice and other times he tells you to shape up. The kid who was looking for an angle on his tickets....62mph in a 30mph zone. Len Tillem says, you don't need a lawyer, you need to stop driving recklessly. Sometime Jesus tells me to stop kidding myself, and stop living recklessly in my faith life. To hunker down and do the work.

OBSERVATION : So the "Who do you say that I am?" thing is the opening question. The next part—the work part—goes like this: Jesus says, "Okay, so I am the Christ of God, here's how you follow me." At this point, earlier in my journey, I would bail on Jesus. I would find lots of reasons why I was not good enough for the road ahead. Somewhere along the way, I forgot my mission of carrying my cross and instead focused on the fear that I was certainly going to be found out, declared as some kind of sub-par Christian disciple, or maybe not a disciple at all...

Video Wall-E (Foreign Contaminant)

Wall-E Video Tag Line : Wall-e is my hero because Wall-e risks being discovered for who he really is, even as he faces an impossible mission. In addition to not having a bath in 700 years, his cross is way too large to bear and yet he presses on, even when he is found out to be sub-par, bent, broken, grimy. Wall-e is 100% contaminated and yet he achieves greatness. He knows, somehow, what's important. And he is entirely focused on fulfilling his mission. Wall-e is a model of spiritual maturity, if an animated robot garbage compactor can be said to be spiritual.

TEXT : And, Jesus connects, as shared with us in Luke and the other Gospel authors, Jesus connects awareness of the identity of Jesus and a rock-solid understanding of what's important. After all, we don't tend to take up any old cross for just any old cause. We take up a cross for things that are matters of life, of life made whole, of life made eternal and durable. Oddly, we take up the cross for our well-being and the well-being of others. We take up the cross for healing and salvation and justice. That takes the ability to see beyond the hardship of cross-carrying to the healing, the salvation and the justice that lies beyond. That takes a lot of personal responsibility.

Text : You know, Luke doesn't mention locale : Mark and Matthew are clear on this, Jesus is in Caesarea Philippi, far, far to the north, beyond Herod's grip. Jesus is on the lam. His next moves will be to resolutely head to Jerusalem. Jesus knew suffering, lest we forget. Jesus knew responsibility. And in the midst of it, he taught and modeled seeing through the suffering to the healing that lay beyond. Bottom Line : Do our actions ever unmask us? Does the way we live our lives reveal a nervous-ness that we are not "good enough" to carry the cross of Jesus? We seek to proclaim a gospel of welcome, healing, justice and acceptance. In what ways are we distracted by the "contaminants", the excuses that get in the way of living responsibly and health-ily? How can we become more responsible for the REAL content of our declarations as they emerge through our

actions?

We often say "we believe in Jesus." But, what we don't say as much is that "Jesus believes in you." And this is the message I want you to take from here today. Not an "everything's okay with me and I don't need to change or grow or heal" kind of message. That's not what I mean when I say Jesus believes in you. That meaning would be a little too much Kum Bay Yah for me. What I mean to say is this: Everything about the ministry of Jesus, the invitation to declare who he is in my life, AND the invitation to take up our cross daily...everything about Jesus demonstrates a deep faith in us, by Jesus, that we *can* make right choices, that we can be strong, that we can behave responsibly. Jesus believes that you can lead a healthy life. It takes that first decision by you, by me, to determine for ourselves who Jesus is. Upon that work, your health may be securely founded.

Next week I will ask you to consider a new/old way to resolve conflict as a healthy follower of Jesus.