

Sermon – Proper 16 – St Mary’s Lake Ronkonkoma

Matthew 16:13-20

Over the course of our lives we encounter a vast array of people from all walks of life who live their lives in many different ways. Out of this vast group of people there is probably a handful that truly stand apart from all the others. In my handful, a young man named Jordan stands out.

I met Jordan in 2014 when he was a patient at Columbia Medical Center and I was a chaplain resident. One of the units that I covered was 7 Hudson South, a dual-diagnosis unit. Patients in this unit typically presented with an underlying disease such as cancer, HIV, blood disease or addiction together with some complicating factor.

Our meeting was serendipitous. I had been called to his room to meet with his roommate, a man who suffered medical complications from addiction and who wanted to see me before he was discharged. The roommates had become close and shared a lot of their life struggles. We all spent some time in quite discussion and prayer.

Jordan was a 20-year-old African American man who suffered with sickle cell anemia, a painful blood disease that affects many African American people. When I walked into their room I was struck by the sight of three very large stuffed toy animals that were on and surrounded Jordan’s bed. I was intrigued by their presence.

When Jordan and I eventually spoke, he soon opened up to me about his young life. He had been raised in the Bronx, one of a number of siblings in a poor family. He had been recruited into a local gang at age 10 and they had become his support structure for 10 years. He had numerous run-ins with the police and had recently been released from Rikers Island jail, where he had served over a year for gang related crime.

Jordan told me that upon his release he went back home only to find that his bedroom had been given away to a cousin. His mother told him that if he wanted to stay he’d have to sleep on the sofa. He felt adrift and unloved. In jail he had been protected by his gang because he held seniority but he had soon questioned his life and his place in the gang. He told me that he had felt a stirring in his heart as he reflected on his life and had found God through attending bible study and by talking with the prison chaplain.

Over a few visits Jordan continued to open up to me about the transformation that he was experiencing which was taking him from his tough life as a gang member to a life as a vulnerable young man reaching out to Jesus for love and searching for meaning. God was slowly revealing Jesus to Jordan. Jordan was listening and responding with a growing consciousness.

What Jordan was experiencing was a similar awakening to Jesus that Peter was experiencing. The culmination of Peter’s growing consciousness is recorded in the gospel reading from Matthew this morning. Peter and the other disciples had been following Jesus for almost three years. After initially enthusiastically following Jesus they often struggled to really understand who Jesus was and what he was doing in the ministry he was undertaking.

In the passage we heard this morning Jesus has lead them to Caesarea Philippi, which was a regional center for the Roman administration. Like most Roman centers the emperor's presence was everywhere in the form of statues and plaques honoring them. The inscriptions often referred to the emperor as Lord, or Son of God or Savior. Jesus took his followers right into the heart of the Roman culture and there he asked them "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

A contemporary analogy for this setting might be found if a Jewish leader took his followers to Auschwitz, or a Japanese leader took his people to Hiroshima or Native American leaders gathering at Wounded Knee. Jesus led his followers to a place of oppressive occupation where defeat and injustice was ever present. For the disciples it would have been a place that made them feel uncomfortable and even vulnerable.

Jesus asked his question of all the disciples who offered up various answers comparing the Son of Man to long dead prophets. Then Jesus got specific. "But who do you say that I am?" It is Simon Peter, who utters the answer. "You are the messiah, the Son of the Living God." Uttered in this Roman stronghold, Peter's declaration was provocative. But Peter got it. Caesar wasn't Lord, Jesus was. Caesar wasn't the Son of God, Jesus was. Caesar wasn't the authority upon which they should organize their lives, Jesus was. Jesus wasn't inviting them into a new religion on the sidelines of the Roman Empire; Jesus was inviting them into a new kingdom that would be founded on him. He would be the chief cornerstone.

Simon Peter, whose name in Greek means 'rock,' was the first to be fully conscious of this new reality. This was a big deal. For Peter and all the disciples, their understanding of the messiah was someone who would come to lead an uprising against the Roman forces and to defeat them, freeing the Jews and others from occupation. This new understanding was different. Jesus as the messiah, the Christ, was to be different. His coming was to be non-violent. Victory would come through defeat, the defeat of Jesus on the cross. Strength would come through weakness and leadership through servanthood. Life would come through Jesus death and resurrection.

Our growing consciousness that Jesus is indeed the messiah often comes through weakness. In weakness and through our vulnerability, God opens us up and allows us to lean into Jesus for strength. It is through this spiritual consciousness and insight that the rock of Christ is founded. John Sanford, author of "The Kingdom within" says that "the rock is not Peter the person but the insight of Peter, the act of consciousness. Wherever this act of consciousness is made, the Church exists."

Whilst each of us must arrive at this insight ourselves, together we bring our own unique gifts and insights into the worshipping community of the Church. We bring the experience of our own transformation from a life lived outside of the knowledge of God, to a life lived in the fullest possible knowledge of God through his son Jesus the Christ. Paul says to his Roman friends, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2). Good advice for us.

Our transformation rarely happens overnight. Our transformation, like those of the disciples, happens over time as we open up to a greater consciousness of God, and God reveals to us through the Holy Spirit, more and more about life lived with God at the center. This is the slow restoration process that we all must go through. It is this restoration that is the mission of the church to support people's restoration to God and to each other through Jesus.

As our transformation happens we learn that we must let go of many things that currently bind us. Resentments and hostility towards others, pride and envy, selfishness and individualism all bind us in places that are not healthy. When we obtain a greater level of consciousness of Jesus we are granted the keys to the kingdom of heaven. These keys allow us to undo all that binds us on earth so as not to bind us in heaven, to forgive others as Jesus has forgiven us. The keys, our insights, help us to loose these things that weigh us down and prevent us from experiencing the fullness of God's love for us and the invitation to feast together at this Eucharistic table.

For Jordan his transformation into a greater awareness of God's saving grace left him feeling alone. His oversized animals brought a sense of comfort to him that would soon be replaced by a deeper level of comfort found in Jesus love for him. God had chosen Jordan for salvation and Jordan had responded by allowing himself to become more conscious of Jesus presence in his life.

Peter's transformation was slow but was supported by Jesus and his fellow disciples. Jordan's transformation was also slow and he was being supported by chaplains and hopefully now by fellow Christians. All of our transformations into a great consciousness of Jesus as the saving messiah are slow. We can though find security in the rock, that is, those people further along the path of transformation.

The church community is vital to providing pastoral support and encouragement for this transformation. Together we hold this sacred space that welcomes people into a deeper relationship with God through Jesus. It is the place where we gain spiritual insight as we renew of minds to understand the will of God in our lives.

May God bless this church of St Mary's and all who come here.

Amen.