

SERMON: Making Jesus Proud
TEXT: Mark 8:27-38

9-12-21

Twenty years later, and most of us will never forget exactly where we were and what we were doing on September 11, 2001. Some were closer to the tragic events of that day. Some were there in New York City at the Twin Towers - just entering or leaving the building. Some were in adjacent buildings, walking down the sidewalk, or riding in a cab. Some were there on business; others on vacation. Some were firefighters, responding to a report of a gas leak in the same vicinity. Some were in Washington, DC, at the Pentagon. Some were in Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

We all have images in our minds of the planes headed straight for the buildings, of people running to escape the all-encompassing clouds of ash, dust, and debris that threatened to swallow them up. We all remember the images of the buildings collapsing to the ground. But the people who were there have a first-hand image, and remember not only the sights of a beautiful, cloudless day suddenly black as night, but the sounds of sirens and screaming and sobbing, the smell of thick smoke and how they choked and gasped for breath as it filled their lungs, the feel of heat on their skin. They remember the last words of their loved ones before they left for work, or when they called from the plane to say a final goodbye.

We will never forget. We *must* never forget.

Today's gospel lesson from Mark has several unforgettable words of its own: when Jesus asks his disciples, *Who do you say that I am?*; when Jesus rebukes Peter with the words, *Get behind me Satan*; and when Jesus explains to his disciples, *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.*

After 27 years of preaching, it is difficult to find a new angle for such a familiar passage. But then my eyes were drawn to the words at the end of this reading that aren't as memorable as the ones before, but are arguably as powerful. Jesus said, *"Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."*

Have you ever been *ashamed* of Jesus or his words? I don't think I have. But as I say that, a story comes to mind.

I was asked to officiate at the wedding of a young woman I knew in Springfield. She was marrying a Jewish man, and she asked if I would be willing to share the officiant duties with a Rabbi. I had never been to a Christian-Jewish wedding, much less officiated at one, so I was excited about the opportunity.

The Rabbi - Jacques something, his last name started with the letter "C" - called me, and we arranged to meet a few weeks before the wedding to discuss the particulars about the service and how each of our faiths would be represented. Toward the end of our meeting, he made it clear that he preferred I not mention anyone with the initials JC, unless I was talking about him.

I agreed to abide by his request - not out of shame for Jesus - but to honor our shared faith in the God of the Old Testament.

Do you think Jesus has reason to be *ashamed* of you? Ouch. It stings just thinking about it.

Shame is such a sharp, cutting word to me. I can handle realizing that I'm guilty of something or that I have made a mistake. But for someone to say the words, "Shame on you," makes me feel like any redeeming qualities I ever had

have been completely washed away and cannot be restored. It feels very final and eternal. It feels like how I imagine Hester Prynne feeling when she had to wear the red “A” (for adultery) on her chest in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s book, *The Scarlet Letter*. It feels like how Jesus might respond to someone who commits an unforgivable sin.

So, maybe we should think about it another way. Instead of wondering - and fearing - the idea of Jesus being ashamed of us, perhaps we could put our energy toward MAKING JESUS PROUD.

When Jesus questioned the disciples, *Who do you say that I am?*, I think he may have wanted more than just a title, more than an acknowledgment of his role. I think he was hoping to deepen the relationship. Perhaps it’s not unlike the questions that one person asks another after several months - or even years - of dating. “Where is this going? How do you feel about me? When will you make a real commitment to this relationship?” I believe it makes Jesus proud when we really take time to stop and consider our relationship with him, who he is to us, who he wants us to be, and how serious our commitment is to him.

I also believe MAKING JESUS PROUD involves letting him be the judge of evil and Satan, and dedicating ourselves to focus on divine things rather than human things. I really don't think Jesus is proud of the deep divisions in our country, and the hatred and violence we spew at one another. MAKING JESUS PROUD would be any effort to overcome hatred with love. I think it would make Jesus proud to see us united as we were after the 9/11 attacks. You may have seen the short poem titled, *I Miss 9/12*:

*I would never, ever want another 9/11, but I miss the America of 9/12.
Stores ran out of flags to sell because they were being flown everywhere.
People were Americans before they were upper or lower class,
Jewish or Christian, Republican or Democrat.
We hugged people without caring if they ate at Chick-Fil-A or wore Nikes.
On 9/12, what mattered more was what united us, than what divided us.*

MAKING JESUS PROUD involves taking up our cross and being willing to lose our lives in sacrificing ourselves for the love of our neighbor and for Jesus' sake. Christianity does not earn us privilege, but calls us to greater responsibility. Our Christian identity is not just a title, not our ticket into heaven, and not a reason for boasting. Rather, as followers of Christ, we are called to share each other's burdens, to rejoice when others rejoice, to weep when others weep. To have compassion and empathy for one another. After all, Jesus, who was fully divine, was also fully human so that he could feel and understand our pain, the pain of the world.

The Lord's Table, where we share the sacrament of communion, is a place of community. It is open to everyone: people from all walks of life, people who hunger and thirst for justice, people in need of acceptance and healing and reconciliation.

Back to our remembrance of 9/11, I heard an interview with Fire Chief Joseph Pfeifer who was the first senior member of the New York City Fire Department on the scene after the first plane crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. He took command of the rescue operation there. One of his duties was to dispatch other firefighters up the stairs to evacuate the building. Among those firefighters was his brother, Kevin, whom he never saw again.

He also talked of some of the work that has been done in the years following the terror attack, which included closer coordination with the New York Police Department. I sensed that the two departments have a history of rivalry and competition, and have not always enjoyed a friendly working relationship. But Pfeifer said that their meetings together always included food - often a full meal prepared by the firefighters. He said that food was key in providing a welcoming and friendly atmosphere for their meetings. He said, "Whenever you share bread together, you become friends."

MAKING JESUS PROUD begins here, when we accept his invitation to be nourished by his sacrifice of body and blood. Finding the strength to take up our cross and to bear one another's burdens begins here, where we receive Christ's body, where we become Christ's body for the world. Knowing Jesus and experiencing his undying love for us begins here at his table.

As we come to the table, may our faith be renewed, may our spirits be restored, and may we find reconciliation with Christ and with one another... to the glory of God!

AMEN.