

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 9:1-17

"Who Is This?"

A major turning point in Jesus' ministry is fast approaching. The crowds are as large as they will ever be, and everyone from the Twelve to Herod Antipas is asking *"Who is this?"* How people answer that question will increasingly divide them into disciples and opponents. The Twelve have now to be brought up to speed as leaders of the disciples. Until now they have been "with Jesus," but in the future they will have to take an active part in his ministry. In the process their faith will be tested and stretched - as the parable of *The Sower* had made clear, it's when the sun shines hot or the weeds start to grow fast that you discover which plants have put down deep roots, or keep growing so the weeds can't choke them.

So there are really two questions to be answered at this crucial mid-point in Jesus' ministry - who is he, and what does it mean to be his disciple? The two questions are obviously and always related: you can't be a good disciple if you don't really know who you're following, and you can't really know who Jesus is unless you commit yourself to be his disciple. It's as true today as ever.

1) *Tests of Faith*

The Twelve are sent out by Jesus to minister without him, but with his power and authority. The mission charge is two-fold (now as then): preach the kingdom of God,

and heal the sick. Word and deed, gospel and helping the needy; when they are separated (as they too often have been), the advance of the kingdom is hindered.

Their mission will require nothing less than total trust in Jesus' power and authority, and in the supply of God and his people. The kingdom does not advance by traveling with donkey-loads of extra personal supplies. The Twelve are to trust God for their needs, which will be provided by the people of God they meet along the way. They should not shop around each village to see which family is most hospitable, but be content with what they get. At times when they are rejected, as they will be, they should leave town and symbolically *"shake the dust off their feet,"* as Jews had always done on returning from Gentile territory. But now "the people of God" will no longer be defined by geography or ethnicity, but solely by faith. The kingdom of God, Jesus' new community, will erase all the ancient boundaries between people.

So off they go, preaching and healing around the villages and towns, and by all accounts with "success." But their actions, and perhaps the growing crowds wherever Jesus goes, for the first time attract the malignant attention of Herod Antipas, who by Roman permission is "ruler" over Galilee. He too asks the question: "Who is this?" Like his father Herod the Great who tried to have

Jesus murdered as an infant, Herod Antipas is a weak, insecure, violent man. We learn here that he has beheaded John the Baptist, whom we heard from in prison, sending messengers to ask Jesus "Are you the one?" Now he is dead, after the infamous banquet at which Herod's step-daughter Salome so entrances Herod that he acquiesces to her designing mother's demand for John's head on a platter.

The menacing shadow of Herod in the background is real. Jesus and his disciples will face more and more opposition from this point on. Their faith will be tested in ways they cannot yet imagine. Perhaps some already wondered which of them would share John the Baptist's fate.

But a test of another kind is imminent. Returning exhausted from their mission trip, Jesus tries to take the Twelve away into the country for a rest, but the crowds follow them. We see what had begun to emerge in the village where Jairus' daughter had died - that the crowds now threaten Jesus' ministry. Now there are over 5000 people following him, and the Twelve are required to "manage" the crowd. But how to feed so many? The Twelve seem to have quickly and completely forgotten the lesson of their own mission trip - do not take extra food, God will provide for your needs! Faced with 5000 people, they can only see the size of the problem, and have too little faith to see a solution.

Jesus of course preaches to the crowd, heals those who need healing, and then takes what little food they have - the famous "5 loaves and 2 small fishes" - and multiplies it until it feeds everyone. There is even enough left over to fill twelve baskets with scraps - no doubt so that the Twelve could also find their needs satisfied after the work of feeding others was done.

Who is this? This is Moses in the wilderness, with "manna from heaven" for the people of God. This is Elisha with only a few loaves to feed 100 men, saying "Give to the people to eat, for this is what the LORD says, 'They will eat and have some left over'" No wonder many people - even Herod - are saying Jesus is "the prophet like Moses" promised long ago; or he is the Elijah who was to come again, or Elisha or one of the prophets of old returned. Jesus himself says, of course, that "He is the Bread of Life who has come down from heaven."

2) Discipleship

Half an idea of who Jesus is will soon be proclaimed by Peter; but when Jesus affirms and then expands on that insight, the Twelve are quickly lost again. But that's the nature of growing in discipleship - the more you know Jesus, the better disciple you become; the more you follow him as a disciple, the more you get to know him. Knowing Jesus as he truly is doesn't happen in a moment; it takes time, probably a lifetime, and even then in this life we only see him "as through a glass darkly."

Who is this? What does it mean to be his disciple? We all need to know him better. We all need to follow him more closely and more obediently. We all need to understand that we are not called to travel through life "heavy laden" with extra supplies, but to learn to rely on him to provide what we need. We also have to re-learn the presumption behind Jesus' mission command to the Twelve - that the Jewish tradition of hospitality and the welcome that some people give the gospel meant that the true "people of God" would provide for the needs of the travelers. In our day we are more likely to live in our "fortress" homes with imaginary moats and drawbridges, than to readily extend hospitality!

Do we believe that God can take the small resources we have and use them for great purposes? We know that the five loaves and two fish that fed 5000 came from one boy! If we also know Jesus' parables about mustard seed or about yeast, we know that he delights in taking very little and using it to make a big difference. He does that with "little people" too - a handful of people, a small Bible Study or prayer group, can change a whole church which in turn can change a whole community.

All he needs are a few people with deeply rooted genuine faith; people in whose lives the word of God has taken such deep root that hot sun or abundant weeds cannot destroy or choke growth; people who can deal with the demands of mission for Jesus, or opposition from the Herods of this world, or the demands of the crowds, and still show their faith; people whose faith in fact grows as they encounter challenges and difficulties and troubles of all kinds - people who realize that today they "know the Lord" better than they did 5 or 10 years ago!

Lord, reveal yourself afresh to us, and make us better disciples!

Let us pray...