

21st Sunday in Ordinary Time (August 26-27, 2017)
St. Mary Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Rev. Michael A. Renninger

“I just hugged the man that murdered my son. I just hugged the man that murdered my son.”

Mary Johnson kept repeating those words in the summer of 2006, as she stood on the sidewalk outside of a prison in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

She was so overcome with relief that she had to sit down.

It had been a long time since she felt any relief. In fact, the last time she had known any joy in life was prior to February 12, 1993. Because, on that day, she got the phone call telling her that her son had been brutally murdered the night before.

She was plunged into a storm of sadness and anger. She attended the trial of the young man who had killed her son. Whenever she spoke of the criminal, she called him “that animal.”

But something was happening in Mary Johnson’s heart. She was a Christian, and she believed that she needed to respond to this situation in the way that Christ taught us. She kept going back to Matthew’s Gospel – the passage we heard today – where Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?”

And Mary had a growing conviction: if we say that Jesus is Lord, if we say that Jesus is the Son of God... then we MUST follow his example in the most difficult moments of our lives.

If we say that he is our Lord, but then ignore him when times are tough, then he’s not really our Lord. If we say that he is our Messiah, and then set him aside when we’re in a crisis, then our every word of faith is a lie. If we say that he is God, and then we don’t follow him in times of confusion and fear, then he’s not really our God. Something, or someone else, is.

On the day that her son’s killer was sentenced, MARY stood in the courtroom and said, “You have to take responsibility for your actions. But as a Christian I also know that Jesus is my Lord, and he wants me to forgive you. So I am working to do that.”

And a few years later, she visited her son’s killer in prison. And they talked. And cried. And she forgave him. She walked out of the prison announcing, “I just hugged the man that murdered my son.”

Mary Johnson is not a theologian. She worked at a telephone company. But she profoundly understood what is happening in today's Gospel reading.

Jesus has taken his closest followers to a Roman town called Caesarea Philippi. And there, at an important turning point in Matthew's Gospel, he asks, "who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

Now, when Jesus says "who do people say that the Son of Man is," he is not talking about someone else. He's using an important Old Testament title, but he's referring to himself. It would be like me asking, "who do people say that the Pastor of Saint Mary's is?" You would know that I'm talking about myself.

The apostles report what they are hearing. Different people are saying different things about Jesus.

Then, Jesus asks the *crucial* question, the *life-changing* question, the question that *every person in this church* must answer: "You. Who do YOU say that I am?"

Who is Jesus in your life? Who is Jesus in your daily decision making?

And here's the great challenge: if we *say* one thing about Jesus, and then *do* another, then our words of faith really ring hollow, don't they?

If I stand before you and say "Jesus is Lord of my life," this **REQUIRES** that I actually allow Jesus to **BE** the Lord of my life. All of my life.

Who do you say that Jesus is? If we answer, "he is the Son of the Living God," we are saying that we're going to turn to him and find our truth in him and let him lead us wherever he wants us to go – even if that means that he wants us to hug the man who murdered our son.

When Jesus asked his disciples, "who do you say that I am," he was not engaged in a polite theological conversation. He was asking: who are you going to turn to when your world is turned upside down? Who are you going to listen to when every other voice is lying to you? Where will you find truth to guide you when the world around you is crazy?

Sometimes, we hear stories about people who **SAY** that Jesus is their savior, and they actually **BEHAVE** as if that's true!

In 2006, when five Amish school girls were killed by a young man who then committed suicide, a family member of one of those girls said to a reporter, "We must follow the example of Jesus. So we'll reach out to the families who lost daughters today, and we must *also* reach out to the

family of the man who committed this crime. They lost a son today.” Where does that kind of loving response come from? It comes from the faith of people who say and believe that Jesus is the Son of God.

In 2001, as thousands of American families were grieving the loss of loved ones because of the 9-11 attacks, a Catholic theologian had the audacity to say, “As we respond to this horror, we cannot be consumed by hate. After all, our faith tells us that God loves every one of his children – including those who perpetrated these attacks.” In the heat of the moment, this message was not warmly welcomed... but it was a statement of truth, coming from someone who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

This past week, following the deaths in Charlottesville, another Catholic theologian wrote an audacious article saying that, as we respond to the great challenge of racism in our nation’s life, we cannot be consumed by hate. White supremacists must be challenged to see that people of every race and culture are children of God.

This theologian *also* pointed out that those who are working against racism must recall that, yes, the white supremacists are also children of God, created in God’s image, *loved* by God. You can imagine the comments he received on his facebook page...

You probably know people who, on a daily basis, make the hard decision to actually do things Jesus’ way, because this is what happens when you say that Jesus is the Son of God.

+ The woman who decides not to abort her child, even though the ultrasound suggests that their might be a problem. She says that Jesus is Lord. She makes decisions with his guidance.

+ The woman who decides that she must raise a question at work because she sees something immoral happening... knowing full well that those who ask questions pay a price. She says that Jesus is Lord. She makes decisions with his guidance.

+ The young couple who refuse to live together before getting married... the husband who takes important steps to avoid the web pages that he knows he shouldn’t be viewing... the college student who avoids the social scene that is steeped in drinking... the neighbor who decides not to join in the gossip... the family who looks at ways to care for God’s creation by recycling more... the people who donate to a charity that is making a difference... the people who speak out when they see injustice...

They do all this, not because it’s easy, but because this is the implication of saying that Jesus is the Son of God.

We could talk all day about what OTHER people are saying about Jesus. But other people are not living your life. You are. So, every day, the question first asked at Caesarea Philippi gets asked of you.

Jesus looks at us with love and asks: “who do you say that I am?”

Be very careful how you answer that question. Because if you say that Jesus is the Son of God, who never know how he'll ask you to change, where he's going to lead you, who it is you may have to serve, or forgive, or hug.

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