

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him. Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "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. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? 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."

(Mark 8:27-38)

I am never quite sure exactly what to call this Sunday. As far as the liturgical calendar is concerned there is a simple answer: this is *ordinary time*: the fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, to be precise. But so many things start up again on this weekend that it feels like we need a drum roll or something, or at least a special name. Some of my colleagues refer to it as "Welcome Back Sunday." But that sounds to my ears like we haven't been here celebrating for the fifteen weeks since the Feast of Pentecost at the end of May. And although it is true that our attendance drops significantly over the summer months, we have most definitely been here. And more importantly God has been here! Our friends across town at Immanuel Lutheran refer to this Sunday as "Rally Sunday." (I noticed this in their newsletter.) I like that and even more I enjoy the image it evokes in my mind's eye of Pastor Dan Wilfrid with pom-poms in his hands, leading a pep rally.

We will commission lay ministers here at St. Francis this weekend. Since that includes all of us, it might be more accurate to say that we are recommitting ourselves to live more faithfully into the Baptismal Covenant by listening for God's call to each and every one of us to be instruments of peace and ambassadors of reconciliation.

If you are relatively new to St. Francis you should know something from the start: the strength of this congregation is not about the charisma and dynamism of its clergy. (Lord, have mercy!) It's about God at work in this place and beyond these walls through the work we are called to share in Christ's name, as members of Christ's Body. It's about the work we do to make worship happen as ushers and music ministers and acolytes and altar guild and Eucharistic ministers and readers. It's about the work we do at the Mustard Seed in Worcester and through Crystosal in El Salvador and reading Morning Prayer at the Holden Nursing Home and teaching our children and our children's children the faith we have received in Church School and Rite 13 and J2A and Confirmation Class and Youth Group. It's about making a joyful noise to the Lord with our voices and with guitars and organ and piano and violin and bells. It's about the *Church Mouse Fair* and *Guess Who is Coming to Dinner* and summer barbecues on rainy days.

On the inside cover of our prayers for the Commissioning Lay Ministers, there is a list of ministries that we are currently involved in here. Consider it an invitation to jump in and get involved. And if you don't see something there that you feel ought to be happening in a parish this size then let's talk. It's

not a recruiting tool to find “volunteers.” It’s not asking that you “help out” the clergy from time to time as it works into your schedule. It is an invitation to share in the work God has given us to do here: it is an invitation to take up your cross and follow Christ.

A colleague of mine says this work of discipleship is about the move from *guest to host*. I offer that as we begin again on this weekend. For some people that transition from guest to host will take days or weeks or months; for others it may take years or even decades. Some people will step up on their second week here and say, “here is what I feel called to,” and others will need to be coaxed into stepping out of their comfort zones. No matter; we take it at our own pace. But it is a move we are all invited to eventually make.

At some point each of us walked through the doors of this church as a guest, and somebody welcomed us in. You might have a clear visual image of the person or persons who did that and if you do, then take a moment to give thanks for that welcome and their ministry to you. Maybe you were not noticed on the first week you came here and it took longer than you wished it would take; or maybe you didn’t really *want* to be noticed in the beginning so you sat in the back and snuck in late and left early, perhaps. But if you are still here, then at some level it must have seemed like this was the kind of place that might *eventually* feel like “home.” If it was in fact difficult for you to be a guest here then learn from that and as you make the move from being guest to host, help make the transition easier for the next person who walks through these doors. If you were not welcomed here as you wished to be welcomed, then consider this your opportunity to make sure the person newer than you has a different and better experience, because for that new guest *you* are now the face of St. Francis. If you have figured out how to balance the *Prayerbook* and the *Hymnal* and make sense of the bulletin and actually know where you are in the liturgy and when to stand or kneel and the person next to you doesn’t: now is your chance!

What I think my friend means by moving from being a guest to becoming a host (or at least what *I mean* by stealing his words!) is that there comes a point in our faith journey when we realize that it is time to take the next step. That, of course, is what today’s gospel reading from the eighth chapter of Mark’s Gospel is all about. Interestingly it comes at almost the exact midpoint of Mark’s Gospel. Peter and the rest of the gang are about to shift from being students sitting at Jesus’ feet watching all that he can do to being called his friends and entrusted to share in his life work: not only the healing and teaching and preaching but the suffering of the Cross as well.

Lord knows, St. Francis Church is far from perfect, and it doesn’t take more than a few weeks to figure that out! Some days the liturgy drags along and some days the sermon is like a dribbler back to the pitcher for an easy out. Some days a church school teacher may not be fully prepared or the choir may take on an anthem beyond their abilities or the acolyte forgets what she is supposed to do. We are not called to perfection and we are not perfect. But we are called to be faithful. We set the bar high and then count on an abundance of grace to make up the difference. As I begin my twelfth fall as the rector of this parish I can honestly say that this is a faithful parish, with God’s help.

When people begin to make that move from being guests to hosts, we are all renewed and strengthened: we are revitalized as a parish community. Maybe that is what we ought to call this weekend: *Revitalization Weekend*. I listened on-line to a sermon that Peter Gomes preached to the freshmen class at Harvard a couple of weeks ago. He told them that they were not just there to learn from wise professors and upperclassmen as passive recipients of a first-class education, but that they

represented Harvard's second chance. He told them that the gifts and ideals and promise they bring with them renews an old place. It's a good message and it's just as true here at a parish that's only fifty-something years old as well. To those of you who have only been a here a year or two, or a month or two, especially if you still feel like a guest, I say this:

Know how glad we are that you are here. Know also that we don't want you to feel like a guest forever, but to share with us in the work to which we feel called. The move from being guest to host begins with prayer and with listening. Know that no one here is expected to do it all. God doesn't want burned out Christians! Rather, by sharing the work we find ourselves participating in something much larger than ourselves and our own ego needs.

So on the way to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples, "who are people saying that I am?" Then as now, that isn't always immediately clear. Some say a great rabbi, a teacher; which is certainly a title used to refer to Jesus in the Scriptures. Even people who do not call themselves Christians can see that Jesus was a smart guy who told funny stories and challenged people to think about the world around them in new ways. There are people out there who are fans of Jesus even if they are frustrated with His Church, and even people who aren't big on "organized religion" can see the wisdom in the Sermon on the Mount. Others will say that Jesus was a prophet like John the Baptist or Elijah or maybe like Mohandas or Bobby or Martin: that he challenged the status quo and invited people to dream of what might yet be, and then to work toward that day. Surely Jesus as he is portrayed in the Gospels is a rabbi and prophet and people not only in Jesus own day but in our own time can see him as such.

But by the grace of God, there comes a point in our journeys when we are no longer merely among the crowds. It's hard to say how it happens, exactly, because it is different and unique to each of us and to our own peculiar journeys. We may have been away for a while from the Church and are now finding our way back. Or something may have happened in our lives to shake the foundations: a marriage or a divorce, a birth or a death. And we find ourselves at a crossroads.

If we aren't careful, we may well find ourselves saying with Peter, "you are the Messiah—you are the Christ." And that changes everything. It changes everything because it commits us to seek and to serve this Christ in all we do. It binds us together not only with Jesus but with the community of people who bear his name, the community that is trying to follow him more dearly, more nearly, more clearly. Always with God's help.

Jesus wouldn't be very comfortable with our consumer culture because he doesn't accept the premise of false advertising. He isn't promising fame and fortune and riches and immunization from the pain of this world. He isn't willing to say or do anything to get people in the door. He just puts it out there—more like the Peace Corps does when they say, "this is the toughest job you'll ever love." *Take up your cross and follow me...*

This day is special but in another sense it's just another Sunday: we are here and the living Christ is here and this invitation is made anew to each of us. We are called to give up something of ourselves in order to find our truest selves. This same God who called Peter and James and John and Andrew and Mary and Martha calls us by name: Rich, Jill, Susan, Charles, Karen, Chris, Laura, Sandy, Jim, Dawn, Joe, Maryann, Bryan, Dianne, Pete, Carrie and Kay and Roger and Jon...

Listen. God calls you by name, too: "take up your cross, and follow me."