

## Proper 19 Year B

Tuesday was my son Rhett's birthday, which reminded me of a story that some of you may know. Rhett moved to Mobile from Austin some years ago needing to take stock in where his life was headed. After some soul searching, he decided to enroll at the University of South Alabama and finish his college education. Because of his interest in radio, music, and film... and media in general, he entered the School of Communications. During his last year he asked me if I would be willing to be interviewed in his television production class... I of course said yes... He told me to meet him at the School of Communications building on a Thursday morning... When I arrived I realized that I hadn't been on a college campus in a long time... college students look a lot younger than they did when I was a college student!... like third graders... and they dress differently... instead of coat and tie and dresses... there are t-shirts and gym shorts and pajama pants and flip flops... I'm pretty sure none of the students I passed in the hallway mistook me for a fellow student... after all I did have my collar on... Rhett told me later that one of his classmates said, upon seeing me in the lobby, that a Rabbi was up front asking where the class met.

The class met in a full blown television studio... three cameras on those big portable stands with teleprompters... acoustical paraphernalia... a studio set with

fancy lighting, and a backdrop featuring the Mobile skyline... a sound room... All the students in the class would, during the course of the semester, master the special roles required to produce a television show.... Camera work; sound mixing, editing, interviewing, and the art of script writing... It was all pretty cool... There was even a person giving us cues as to how many seconds until we were on the air... and then the signal for cutting to a commercial ... Rhett was in the role of director... the interviewer was a freckled face redheaded kid with a South Park t-shirt on, gym shorts, and Birkenstocks. I had not seen the questions of the interview beforehand... The instructor was sitting dispassionately in the back of the studio. The interviewer was surprisingly calm, as if he'd done this before.... Three, two one... we were on the air... He asked about the Bayou Bash... "So, Reverend Flowers, you have a big event coming up... tell us about that." I told him about the Bayou Bash, that it was a fun party, live music... that we raised money for community ministries, and that all of the net proceeds we give away... "Really?" He said, showing what seemed like genuine interest... He continued... "So you went to seminary in Texas?.... Do you like Alabama or Texas barbeque the best?" I stammered, taken aback... well.... Texas, I admitted.... "Probably going to be some haters out there, right?" he asked... "Wouldn't be the first," I answered... He moved on seamlessly... "What would you say is the core identity of your church", he asked... Wow, I thought... good question; he's done his homework...

so I had to pause and think, and there was so little time, the timekeeper rolling his hand... and I realized that it was no simple task to speak for all of us... All Saints Church with our diverse opinions and beliefs... our doubts and uncertainties... our mutual discoveries.... I realized in a moment that most modern, western Christian churches have a prescribed set of beliefs and dogmas to which the faithful must ascribe... a narrow and rigid belief system... We're not that way, I thought.... We say or sing the creed, but even in its historical richness, it is speculative... and that's a good thing, I mused... In our ethos not only do we not mind sensitive and challenging questions, we encourage them... For us the life of faith and our practice of it, is an evolving process of discovery that deepens as we go... changes course, even ...that we are never complete, always becoming... For us, our love of beauty and mystery, the way we worship, our quest for enlightenment, more clearly define us than a set of rigid principles or beliefs... All of this reverie flashed in my mind in a moment... He was waiting for me to answer the question, and the student behind the camera was making the hurry up signal... So little time... So this is what I said: "We are a people who believe in Jesus Christ as the archetype of the true human... that our life of faith, our life as the baptized, is to follow the way of Jesus' teaching and the way he patterned his life, challenging the status quo, and standing against evil and violence, welcoming the outcast and the marginalized... that salvation has less to do with us, but everything to do with our

neighbor, everything to do with changing our world for the better; that we are in intimate partnership with God, who we believe is among us; that we are about the high calling of restoring dignity and well-being to those who have none....

“Awesome,” he said... the prompter was signaling... “And now this commercial break.”

Jackson, the interviewer, lifted his ball cap, brushed back his floppy red hair and adjusted his microphone.... “O.K. Rev. Good job,” he said... “We’ll rap this up in the next segment” .... which was to start in 30 seconds; I had worked up a sweat... 3,2,1 the metronomic hand of the prompter counted... “Well, we’re back,” he said... “Reverend Flowers, who would you say has influenced you the most intellectually?” ... Good God!, I thought... this guy’s on a roll!.... Shakespeare, I said... “Why Shakespeare?” ... he deadpanned... 15 seconds the prompter signaled... time running out.... “Because in his art, the finest English ever written, he elevated the human experience, both the dark and the light, into the realm of meaning and beauty” ... I could feel my adrenaline rising. I had so much I wanted to say... “Cool”, he said... “so that’s all the time we have” .... That was it... He got up, grabbed his backpack and his I-phone... told me it was nice to meet me... and left for his next class... I was utterly exhausted.

On the way home I thought about the deep questions. As it turned out, Rhett had written the script... I thought about Mark's gospel... I thought about how Mark's gospel is all about the identity of the baptized... "Who do you say that I am?" Jesus asks his disciples, and that of course is the same question as "who are you that follow Jesus?" Because this gospel is about the identity of Jesus as the identity of the baptized.... And that identity is found amid the tension, all too true of our humanity, the tension between self-interest and self-giving... that to follow Jesus... to take up our cross, as Jesus commands us to do, is to make the conscious choice, that the well-being and dignity of our neighbor is infinitely more important than our own... That we are to, as Jesus puts it, lose our lives... and that in making such a decisive choice is to find true freedom and joy.... that's a paradigm the world does not understand... But it is true in God's world... I think it is really that simple... this gospel vision... that it is not about belief only; belief is ever changing and evolving, but that it is about simply following; following in the way; that we are collaborators, as it were, in the process of creation... the glorious process that is God's very life.... we are to raise the human experience into the realm of meaning and beauty.... That in healing the wounds of our neighbor... we find healing for ourselves.... The disciples in Mark's gospel continually struggle with the identity of Jesus, and therefore their own... Is he in the mold of Moses or Elijah, or John the Baptist?... Is he, like David, the anointed of God to bring

freedom to the people of Israel from the oppression of empire, or is he God's son like Solomon to build a kingdom of might and power so that all the world might see the power of the Hebrew God.... None of those, and all of those, I thought....

The early church wrestled with those very questions.... But it seems the bottom line is that Jesus is sent... just as we too are sent to take up the cross of vulnerability and empathy... to wear the mantle of compassion... to put on the power of sacrifice and kindness and welcome... It's about power, this gospel, but power not as the world understands power, to be sure.... But the way God understands power... in vulnerability, in sacrifice, in loving our neighbor as we love ourselves... in welcoming the other.... in bearing God's gracious blessing of justice and shalom to the world.... To take up our cross is to spend ourselves to live out the gospel vision where we live... to sacrifice our life's body and blood, all of who we are, for the good of our brother who is lost, for the good of our sister who is marginalized... To live in the light of love and free from the darkness of fear... that is our identity... That is our hope, and the hope of those we serve....

That might make a good sermon, I thought on my way home from West Mobile... or at least a good interview, if only I had the time.... Or maybe it's just a way to live with the time we've got... a way to claim our identity... but still,... there's just so little time.