

Proper 16, Year A  
Matthew 16: 13-20  
August 24, 2008

Trinity Episcopal Church  
Sonoma, California

A Stranger at the Door:  
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Susan Allison-Hatch

Sometimes the gospel comes knocking at your door. At least it did for me this week.

I was sitting in my office reading an ancient leather-bound Lives of the Saints when I heard a tentative knock at my door. At first, I wasn't even sure it was knock. It was so light. Then I heard it again. This time more clearly. Thinking it was someone on their way to the Wednesday service, I didn't even rise from my chair. I just said, "Come in."

Into my office walked a stranger—a stranger with a big question. He sat down in the chair opposite my desk—the chair closest to the door. He pulled that chair up to the desk, leaned forward and asked his question. "What kind of church is this?"

I was somewhat taken aback. I wasn't expecting that question at quarter to ten on a Wednesday morning. You can imagine I stumbled through an answer. To his question I mumbled something like "We're a Christian church; fairly liberal." Feeling miserable about my answer I added, "We like to think of ourselves as big-tent kind of place—a place where folks have different ideas and still worship together." Not much of an answer but at least enough to keep us in conversation.

The stranger then asked another question, an even bigger one—"Who do you think Jesus is?" That's the question Jesus asks in the Gospel we hear today. To his disciples Jesus says, "Who do you say that I am?"

All week long I've been thinking about that question. I don't even remember how I answered that one. I just remember how lame my answer was. Perhaps because I tried to answer in words and doctrine.

That stranger asked me one more question—the hardest of the three. He said to me, "How will we recognize Jesus here among us?" I didn't even take a pass at that. I was so astounded, and truth be told, a bit taken aback by that question.

Do you ever have times when you wish you could re-live a moment—a moment when you're caught off guard, an opportunity you've missed? I'm in such a time right now. I wish that I could put the week on re-wind. I wish that I could try that day once again.

I hear the knock. I get up and go to the door. I open it and say, "Come in. Sit down. Glad to see you." Maybe I offer him a glass of water, a cup of tea.

And then I play the conversation one more time.

“What kind of church is this?” he asks as he pulls up his chair.

I say to him, “ We’d like to be the kind of church where folks work hard at following Jesus. Sometimes that’s hard for us. We screw up. We say things and wish them back. We hurt each other. We miss the mark. Yet we in this church, we try our best. We struggle to live as Jesus would have us live—to love one another, to forgive even when we find ourselves wanting to nurse our wounds, to talk to one another face to face rather than behind one another’s back. We try. We do our best. That’s all we can do. The rest we leave to God.” Our conversation has begun.

He asks another question—the one the Gospel asks as well. “Who do you think Jesus is?” “Who do you say that I am?”

Talking like a rabbi, I answer the question with the question. I say to the stranger sitting by my desk, “Who do I think Jesus is—he’s the one I follow. What more can I say?” Maybe I then say, “Remember what Jesus says towards the end of the Gospel of Matthew? He says, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me....’”

We’re in a groove. Our conversation’s getting hot.

That stranger asks me one more question—the hardest of the three. He said to me, “How will we recognize Jesus here among us?”

Oh what I wish I’d done! Take his hands in mine and say, “I see him now. I see him in your face.”

Then I say to him, “You asked me what kind of a church we are. I wish you’d come and see.”

Ahh. But that’s not how it went. And therein lies the lesson of the day, for ours is faith of second chances and new opportunities. The stranger returns to the door again and again and again. Each time he does, he asks the same question. “Who is Jesus?”

Jesus asks his disciples—Jesus asks us, “Who do you say that I am?” That’s a question we answer every day. That’s a question we answer with our lives, a question we answer in how we treat one another and a question we answer in how we treat the stranger in our midst. The one we follow is a most gracious host. Again and again he asks us that question—“Who do you say that I am?” And each time we have an opportunity to answer it in a different way, a better way, a way more in keeping with the Gospel and with who we are as children of God. Thanks be to God.