

## Season After Pentecost [Proper19B]

September 12, 2021

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Mark 8: 27-38

*Grace to you and peace from God – Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Cory Albaugh was very eloquent and earthy in his remembrances of his Dad, Todd, who had died after a battle with COVID. The portrait he presented was filled with great admiration and, also, laughter. Todd's work ethic, kindness, inclusive warmth, love of a good party and his humor were part of his legacy. To show some of his father's quirky humor, Cory played a film clip from the Will Ferrell movie, *Talladega Nights*. Though I would **never** recommend this film after looking it up and hearing the mean, foul language even in some movie clips, the excerpt shown yesterday at Todd's memorial service (believe it or not) reminded me of Jesus' question in today's gospel, "Who Do YOU say I am?"

At this point in the film, Ricky, the lead character, is a mega-winning NASCAR racer. At this dinner table scene, he is joined by his wife Carly, his best friend, Cal, his sons, and Chip, his father-in-law. Ricky is asked to offer the meal blessing and here is how it goes:

"Dear Lord Baby Jesus, or as our brothers in the South call you: 'Hey-suz'. We thank you so much for this bountiful harvest of Dominos, KFC, and the always delicious Taco Bell. I just want to take time to say thank you for my family: my two beautiful, beautiful, handsome striking sons, Walker and Texas Ranger, or TR as we call him. And, of course, my red hot smokin' wife Carly . . . I also want to thank you for my best friend and teammate, Cal Naughton Jr, who's got my back no matter what . . . Dear Lord Baby Jesus, we also thank you for my wife's father Chip. We hope that you can use your Baby Jesus powers to heal him and his horrible leg. It smells terrible and the dogs are always botherin' with it. Dear Tiny Infant Jesus . . ."

His wife, Carly interrupts him, "Hey, um . . . you know, sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him baby. It's a bit odd and off puttin' to pray to a baby."

Ricky responds, "Well, look, I like the Christmas Jesus best when I'm sayin' grace. When you say grace, you can say it to Grown-up Jesus, or Teenage Jesus, or Bearded Jesus, or whoever you want."

"You know what I want?" His wife says, "I want you to do this grace good so that God will let us win tomorrow."

Ricky continues, "Dear Tiny Jesus, in your golden fleece diapers with your tiny, little fat balled up fists...!"

The elder Chips says, "He was a man! He had a beard!..."

"Look," Ricky says, "I like the Baby Jesus best. I win the races and I get the money." Exasperated, his wife says, "Ricky, finish the \*\$\$\$ grace!..."

Ricky's friend Cal, says, "I like to picture Jesus in a Tuxedo T-shirt, 'cause it says, like, 'I wanna be formal, but I'm here to party, too.' I like to party, so I like my Jesus to party...."

One of the sons says, "I like to think of Jesus as a Ninja fighting off evil Samurai..."

Cal says, "I like to think of Jesus like, with giant eagles' wings and singin' lead vocals for Lynyrd Skynyrd with like an Angel Band, and I'm in the front row, and I'm hammered drunk..."

After Carly tells Cal to shut-up, Ricky continues his prayer, "OK. Dear Eight Pound, Six Ounce, Newborn Infant Jesus, don't even know a word yet, just a little infant, so cuddly, but still omnipotent. We just thank you for all the races I've won and the \$21.2 million dollars (Woo!) ... LOVE THAT MONEY that I have accrued over this past season. Also due to a binding endorsement contract that stipulates I mention PowerAde at each grace, I just wanna say that PowerAde is delicious and it cools you off on a hot summer day and we look forward to PowerAde's release of mystic mountain blueberry. Thank you, for all your power and your grace, Dear Baby God, Amen."

Jesus asks his disciples, "*Who do people say that I am?*" Those first disciples told him what they had heard. "Some say you're John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." Then, Jesus, asks the disciples a different question. "*Who do you say I am?*" It wasn't an easy question. They had heard Jesus teach... do the miraculous... spar with the religious leaders. generate curiosity, fear, longing, hate and puzzlement. Peter answers, "You are the Messiah." He says the right word but soon shows he doesn't know or like the meaning of Messiah as Jesus will live it.

When people today watch and listen to what the leaders and members of Christian churches say and do, they too are asking us, "Who do you say Jesus is? Who is this God you profess?" They listen to the responses between and within different Christian denominations... they see portrayals in movies and on television.... they personally encounter Christian persons and groups...and they witness what is said from various religious, political and religious-political podiums --- which makes for a wild cacophony of answers, emphases and interpretations. It may seem to those who ask, that the Christian community is saying, "Well, you pick the kind of Jesus you want." Baby Jesus, all warm and cuddly, smelling of Christmas? A Jesus with a tuxedo t-shirt who is something special but likes to par-tee woo!? Or maybe, as the apostle Peter would have appreciated, Jesus as a

ninja warrior, ready to defeat the evil Roman warriors and empire. Or, Jesus as the leader of your favorite band who went along with however you wanted to act? What I saw in that brief movie clip was a crude version of the all-too-real trap we easily fall into – “make Jesus... make God who you want God to be... Make God a God you can live with or control.... make God someone that others will buy into.”

I wonder, if one of the reasons our Christian presence and witness seems to have become less relevant or inspiring is because we do not provide a clear picture of the loving, saving, gracious, sacrificial Lord we profess. He’s either an over lenient parent who doesn’t care what you do or one who punishes persons or countries who stray with disasters? Jesus is either a shepherd who loves all, most or just those sheep that favor the church or correct lobbying organization with their funds? God either likes traditional organ music, staid liturgy and rote responses or God prefers modern music, unscripted worship and highly emotive responses? God either wants us to pray and commune with only certain, designate people to avoid being tainted or God wants everyone included or, at least, those who look, act and dress like the rest of us. We know there are truths, exaggerations and half-truths in all those either/or variations. So Jesus and those around us still ask, “Who do YOU say that I am?”

Why is this such an important question? Because the God we proclaim will also explain who *we* are. If Jesus is the Lord of our lives, then our attitudes, words and actions will reflect the one we follow. *That* is what others will notice and experience. Not our ancient creeds or theological theorems but us — as a church and as members of the body of Christ. The mission field for disciples is right here — in our ever-transforming lives and church and in the wider community we live in that isn’t quite sure what to make of us and this God we love.

At one evangelism conference the speaker said there were only two very basic, very important questions others have for us --- “Who is your God?” and “What has your God told you to do to me?” So, while risking oversimplification, tripping on treasured “isms” or

excluding someone's own Baby Jesus preference, I'm working on a reply. So far it goes something like this:

God is good and the source of all that is good and life-giving. God loves you, me and all creation unconditionally, wholly, perfectly, equally and eternally. God wants all of creation to thrive, each person to become all they were created to be and all of us to partner with God to make it so. We were made to love like God loves and I need God's help and the support of a community to be able to do it and learn how to do it better. We are part of God's plan to overcome evil, injustice, hunger, homelessness and whatever breaks God's good heart. God loves us. We love God by loving all others. We love by caring and serving, even if it means sacrifice so all can know God's care and love. That is the God of my heart and my church and that God has told me to love you so you can know the love of God. There's a lot I don't understand and questions I have in my hip pocket to ask Jesus when I die. But even when I cannot see it or feel it or understand, I still know that God is good all the time. All the time God is good. That is who I say, you are, Lord, but I'll keep listening.

So, who do you say God is? Who does Haven say God is? What God will others see in us? Will we see Jesus in those God loves? Dear, Baby Jesus, help me, help us to make our witness as true and grace-filled as you are. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 9/11/21