

"Caffeine, Carburetors, Crises and Christology"
A Sermon preached by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – September 12, 2021

PLEASE READ:
James 3:1-12
Mark 8:27-38

As we gather as a church community this Rally Day, I invite you to reflect with me on what are ways people are inspired to become part of a community?

We as a church are a subset of our larger community, and I think most of you know that today is also the Caffeine and Carburetors car rally hosted by Zumbach's Coffee shop. I enjoyed meeting Doug Zumbach, founder and manager of the mecca for mocha in our town and was fascinated to learn how he started the event that today will welcome around 5,000 visitors to our little town for the rally. It's really simple, actually. Doug loves coffee, and Doug loves cars, et voila! The first Caffeine and Carburetors event was back in 1985 and had 6 cars. It grew to 36 in 1997, and today features over 1,700 cars from as far away as Maine. In other words, this is a huge event that attracts people from all over the Northeast! The cool thing is, everyone is welcome to bring your car, whether it's a multi-million-dollar Pagani or an old jalopy you have to push to get here. There is no judging and no cost. It's all free.

Doug's enthusiasm is contagious, and I loved hearing about how he loves to see people enjoying the cars. It's a family event and kids who like cars but have only seen them on TV or in magazines walk around to discover their favorite cars parked on our town's main street! Doug shared one of his favorite stories about one of the rallies when a million-dollar Ferrari racing model pulled up beside a 1961 Austin Healy rust bucket. The two owners started talking and came to find out that the Ferrari's owner's first car was a 1961 Austin Healy. They spent the whole morning opening the hood and looking over the Austin Healey as the Ferrari owner was eager to remember his first car and help give the Austin Healey owner some ideas about how to restore his car. Ironically, it was the old rust bucket that got all the attention, and the owners had a great time talking and sharing ideas.

In other words, because of Doug Zumbach's desire to share two things he loves, coffee and cars, he brings literally thousands of people together. I gotta say, after being there this morning and seeing so many people and so many cool cars, I encourage you to look for the next car rally in October. It's a lesson for us in the church. Community is formed around a common love. No judging. All are welcome; and it's free for all ages ...

Community is also formed in times of crisis and need. This weekend we remember the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. I think we all can remember exactly where we were when we first learned about the attacks. I was moved by the ceremony here at the town hall yesterday, remembering that three of the initial victims, were three of our New Canaan community neighbors: Joe Coppo, Brad Fetchet, and Eamon McEneaney.

I was humbled to hear Mary Fetchet and her husband Frank talk about the tragic death of their son Brad in the World Trade Tower attacks, and how Mary led the way in forming with other victim's families an organization now called *Voices: Center for Resilience*. I was impressed with the thousands of lives they have touched over the last 20 years with compassionate care and practical support, and how the work they have done for victims of 9/11 has also expanded internationally to reach victims of other terrorist attacks.

I was amazed to learn that Mary traveled to Paris after the Bataclan attacks in 2015 to be with the victims of families there. She is uniquely qualified to understand what the families of victims were going through and to offer hope after the devastating loss of loved ones. The Fetchets are inspiring as they have forged a global community of care and compassion that transforms the painful energy of grief into generative and life-giving community.

It was also able to speak this week with Bonnie McNamara, wife of Eamon McEaney, also killed in the World Trade Tower attacks. As I learned more about this amazing man, a lacrosse legend in his own time, I was deeply moved to know that he was a hero in the World Trade Center bombings of 1993, taking time to usher 60 colleagues out of the building from the 105th floor! During the 9/11 attacks it was the “Lacrosse Guy” who in his last moments was leading a prayer circle of the Lord’s Prayer before being lost in the crumbling inferno. I was humbled by Eamon’s example, both in life and in death, and will always associate him with a Christ-like example of self-giving love.

So you see, community can be formed around positive values and what is cherished ... Caffeine and Carburetors! Or, community can be formed around crises, a time of threat and destruction which clarifies what it is we hold dear and are willing to protect and nurture.

Which brings us to our gospel lesson and Peter’s famous confession, one of the first “Christological” assertions about the identity of Jesus. It’s been said that the church has a problem, and his name is Jesus Christ! Indeed. What do we do with Christology? The word means literally *Christ logic*, or our understanding about Christ. Christ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messach, which means Messiah, or the anointed one, the one promised by God to realize God’s vision of all that is good, true and beautiful, all that is righteous and just.

Confessing Jesus as the Christ is one of the historic bases for Christian community. Did you know that our PCUSA Book of Order declares that membership in the church is to be determined *solely on the basis of faith*? The true church welcomes anyone simply – nothing more and nothing less – by the confession: “Jesus Christ is Lord.” The question is, what does that really mean, and how is this confession the basis for *authentic community*. Or put another way, what does Christian community really look like?

Jesus asks some key questions of his disciples. The first is simply, “Who do people say that I am?” Jesus first asks his disciples to consider what picture the public is forming of him. And the answer was, “Some say you are John the Baptist. Others say that you are Elijah or one of the prophets ...”

Why do you suppose Jesus asked that question? The Jews of the day believed that before the Messiah comes, there will be one like John the Baptist or Elijah or one of the prophets. So, when the crowd said Jesus was John or one of these other great men, what they meant was, “We believe Jesus is the *forerunner* of the Messiah.” And that made him very important. He helped to build people's expectations.

The hope of the coming Messiah lured crowds of thousands of people. So, it seems logical to assume that even *larger* crowds would gather when the followers of Jesus started saying, “The Messiah is here! The Messiah has come! The promised one - the anointed one of God - has come!” You would think this news would gather larger crowds. After all, if the *promise* brought thousands, would not *fulfillment* bring tens of thousands? But astonishingly, they did not come in larger numbers. *The crowd, in fact, got smaller.* In fact, people began

to persecute Jesus' disciples for proclaiming the Good News. Why is that? Why is it that so many people are put off by the proclamation that Jesus is the Christ - that he is the Messiah?

I think the answer to that question may shed light on why Jesus wanted to keep his identity a secret for a while. He understood how many of us think. He understood that many people in this world wrap their lives around fanciful *expectations* and *anticipations*. We thrive on *anticipation*. And the paradox is, if *anticipation* is a way of life, you do not want *fulfillment*.

Looking forward to something can be the way you spend your whole life, and you really are disappointed if it comes to pass. In much of life, the pleasure is more in the chase than in the catch. The magnificence of life's promise is often lost in the poverty of its achievement ... Why do you suppose so many people do such crazy things during their mid-life crises? They leave faithful partners for someone else. A number of top executives and managers I have known over the years have expressed deep frustration with the lack of fulfillment in positions they thought would offer them the world. As one friend told me, "Climbing ladders is what's exciting in the corporate world, not standing on any particular rung ..."

And let's not forget the obvious fact, that when you stop to look at the news on-line or read the morning paper, or consider the painful reality of much of life, it is much easier to believe that a messiah *will come* than to believe that one *already has come*.

Jesus asked his followers, "But who do *you* say that I am?"

It's a question that continues to echo throughout the ages. This Jesus born in a stable, who lived in a simple village far away from any royalty, was virtually unknown until age thirty. He came preaching the Good News of faith and repentance, of forgiveness, of healing and of hope; but he was scorned and rejected by his own people; nailed to a cross and left to die by even his closest friends ... Is *this* the Messiah? There's so much that he *didn't* do for all of the expectations that people had and still have of him today.

In fact, Jesus shattered a lot of illusions about what the Messiah would be. After Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah, Jesus raises serious questions in all of his followers' minds. Contradiction of all contradictions, Jesus talks about going to a cross, going to be killed. He talks about whoever wants to save their life must lose it ... We are to forget ourselves, pick up our crosses, and follow Jesus ... How could this be the Messiah? Or, how can we accept him as such?

If we're brutally honest, I think even many of us in the Christian church would rather believe that a Messiah *will come*, rather than commit our lives to following the one who already has come; especially when it means picking up a cross and self-emptying love; we would prefer to postpone our answer to the Lord's question rather than put our hope in Peter's answer.

The central miracle of the Christian faith is "The Messiah has come, and it is Jesus." Such faith is a gift of grace. Such conviction is a miracle of inner transformation.

A view that once dreamed, "Wherever the Messiah is, there is no misery," is transformed into the present conviction, "Wherever there is misery, there is the Messiah." "If my enemy persecutes me, I will pray for them." "If I am hit on the one cheek, I will turn the other." "If I suffer wrongdoing, I will forgive, as many times as I have to leave open the door for reconciliation." "I will love my beloved with all patience and kindness, without envy or

boasting, and without pride ...” “I will love my neighbor.” “I will choose to love my enemy.”

So, on this Rally Day, consider again your Christology and your understanding of Christian community. Consider again around whom we are rallying as we look to the future ... Jesus’ question haunts us: “Who do you say that I am?”

In fact, we are going to have different answers to that question, and we can be transformed into different types of community. But I hope and pray that, whatever our answer is, we will follow in the way of Jesus; a way, like Doug Zumbach, that in joyful freedom generously shares the love of his heart, or the way of the Fetchet and McEneaney families who through forgiveness and self-giving love forge new life and encourage others to live on with hope and meaning. Jesus’ way of the cross is paradoxically the way of new life, and he calls us to follow him into that new life, to be a community of life and death, but finally, a community of resurrection.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.