

Deanery Confirmations – Christ Church, Waukegan
April 5, 2008

Push Me

A wonderful old Jewish story:

When it was time to name their firstborn son, a husband and a wife began to argue. She wanted to name him after her father; he wanted to name him after his father. Finally they had to call in the Rabbi to settle their quarrel.

“What was the name of your father?” the Rabbi asked the husband.

“Abijah,” he said.

“And what was the name of your father?” he asked the wife.

“Abijah,” she said.

“Then what is the problem?” asked the confused Rabbi.

“You see, Rabbi,” said the woman, “My father was a scholar and his father was a horse thief.

How can I allow my son to be named after a man like that?”

The Rabbi gave very serious thought to it all, for the problem was a delicate one. He did not want one party feel it had won and the other that it had lost. So he finally said, “This is what I suggest you do. Call the boy Abijah. Then wait and see if he becomes a scholar or a horse thief, and you will know after whom he was named.”

How do you know someone? How do you really know someone? Not, how do you know this or that about them? But how do you know them. How do you get in touch with what makes a person tick? How do you find out what makes a man or a woman a person?

I think the Rabbi knew the answer to that question. It is the only answer that makes any sense to me. Jesus said it too, “By their fruits you will know them.”

In the gospel story we just heard Jesus comes home. He comes home to the town in which he had been brought up, and he goes to church. They hand him the scroll and he chooses the reading from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor ... to proclaim release to the captives, sight to the blind, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.” Every eye was on him. They had heard the stories about this wonder-working young Rabbi, someone they thought they knew all about. Every eye was on him. In the silence, Jesus sits down and declares that today this passage of scripture has been made a reality right there in their presence.

The audacity. The people of Nazareth knew this Jesus, Yeshua, didn't they? This was Joseph's boy. They knew him. But Jesus throws that assumption back at them. They didn't know him at all. He wasn't going to fit neatly into their assumptions.

That great man of prayer, the monk Thomas Merton said once, “If you want to know who I am, don't ask about the color of my hair, or the way I walk, or what I do for a living. If you want to know who I am, ask me what I'm living for and then push me into it.”

Jesus told the people in that synagogue who he was. He told them what he was living for. And just telling wasn't enough of course. It never is. Jesus wasn't particularly unique, you know, not in anything he said. Jesus didn't really have much to say that was new. There had been lots of

religious teachers in Israel saying pretty much the same things Jesus was saying. People had heard it all before. No, the thing that made Jesus different was not what he said. The thing that made Jesus different was that he acted consistently as though he really believed it. In Jesus the word and the deed are one thing. That's always something startling.

Jesus declared what he was living for and he allowed himself to be pushed into it. He invited that push. That's the remarkable thing about Luke's account of this scene in the synagogue. Jesus isn't just talking – even in first century Palestine talk was cheap. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Here it is, folks. You've heard all about it all these years, the promises in the prophets about how God is coming to set us all free. Here it is. I am doing it. I bear the name – that's what the name Jesus means: God saves. The name of the God who has promised to release the captives and open eyes. I bear the name and I am making that name a reality. Push me into my name and find out who I am.

It proves to be a very risky name that Jesus carries. It is a name that belongs to a very risky God. Playing it safe does not seem to be part of God's standard operating procedure. Good news to the poor; release to the captives, new sight for the blind; liberty for the oppressed. It all sounds pretty subversive, even revolutionary. And ultimately it was too much for the world to bear. It was certainly too much for those folks in Nazareth – later on in Luke's account, they try to throw Jesus off a cliff.

The name of God is not a name that can be invoked to bless the status quo. A kind of standardized incantation at the end of every political speech. That kind of thing is a pale

reflection of Isaiah's vision if it does not take seriously the risk of unseating our comfortable assumptions about power and who God's favorites are. If you want to find out who we are, find out what we're living for and then push us into it. That's what we're here to do today – confirmation and reception are all about just that. Not primarily about church, but about life in the world. We've gathered together for the strength that only comes from being together so that we will be able to make a difference in the world. The Christian faith isn't just about our private religious opinions ... it is social and even political. I think it's what great moral leaders from Ghandi to Martin Luther King meant when they said that the measure of any society is how it treats its weakest members.

In baptism you and I have received a risky name, a new name. We belong to God's own family in a very specific way. In baptism we are born into the Body of Christ and we have been named with Christ's own name, branded with his sign – Christian, marked as Christ's own forever. We bear the name and we bear the responsibility of the name, that's what all those baptismal promises are about. They tell us who we are.

A friend of mine says that whenever his teenagers used to walk out of the door at night to go out with their friends, he would say goodbye with these words, "Just remember, you're a Stevenson."

Just remember, you're a Christian. How will the world know who we are? How will the world know the secret of our identity? What are we living for, in our parishes, in our families and work lives, as individuals? Let us stand with Jesus. Let us live for the poor, the blind, the

oppressed ... wherever we find them in our lives. Let the scriptures continue to be fulfilled in our hearing. Let us live so that the world will find out what we're living for, and then push us into it.