September 13, 2015
24th Sunday in Ordinary Time –
“Really … Who Do We Say Jesus Is, and What Are We Doing About It?”
Deacon Dave Snyder

Reading 1: Isaiah 50:5-9A
The Lord GOD opens my ear that I may hear; and I have not rebelled, have not turned back. I gave my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who plucked my beard; my face I did not shield from buffets and spitting. The Lord GOD is my help, therefore I am not disgraced; I have set my face like flint, knowing that I shall not be put to shame. He is near who upholds my right; if anyone wishes to oppose me, let us appear together. Who disputes my right? Let that man confront me. See, the Lord GOD is my help; who will prove me wrong?

Reading 2: James 2:14-18
What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister has nothing to wear and has no food for the day, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well,” but you do not give them the necessities of the body, what good is it? So also faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead. Indeed someone might say, “You have faith and I have works.” Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works.

Gospel: Mark 8:27-35
Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Along the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” They said in reply, “John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others one of the prophets.” And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter said to him in reply, “You are the Christ.” Then he warned them not to tell anyone about him.

He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days. He spoke this openly. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. At this he turned around and, looking at his disciples, rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do.”

He summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.”

HOMILY
With the upcoming visit of Pope Francis to the United States, I thought I’d share a little story:

The Pope goes to New York. He is picked up at the airport by a limousine. He looks at the beautiful car and says to the driver, “You know, I hardly ever get to drive. Would you please let me?” The limo driver is very hesitant and says, “I'm sorry, but I don't think I'm supposed to do that.” But the Pope is quite persistent, so the limo driver finally gives in. “Oh, all right, how can I say no to the Pope.” So the Pope takes the wheel, and wow, is he a speedster! He hits the gas and goes around 80 mph in a 45 zone. A policeman notices and pulls him over. The cop walks up and asks the Pope to roll down the
window. Quite startled and surprised, the young officer asks the Pope to wait a minute. He goes back to his patrol car and radios the chief.

Cop: Chief, I have a problem.
Chief: What sort of problem?
Cop: Well, you see, I pulled over this guy for driving way over the speed limit but it's someone really important.
Chief: Important like the mayor?
Cop: No, no, much more important than that.
Chief: Important like Governor Cuomo?
Cop: Much more important than that.
Chief: Like President Obama?
Cop: More.
Chief: Who's more important than the president?
Cop: I don't know, but he's got the Pope driving for him!

This past week, a friend at work, a non-Catholic Christian, was sharing his views about the Bills quarterback situation when out of the blue, he added, “But, do you know who I really admire? Pope Francis – there’s just something about him, he’s such a pope of the people and among the people. He’s just like his namesake.” And then, he started to rattle off what the Pope has done to back up his statement, like riding a bicycle on the streets of Argentina as a bishop, and traveling to a store on the streets of Rome the other day to try on a pair of eyeglasses versus having them come to the Vatican. A pope of the people and among the people – I wonder how he’ll be remembered 30, 40 years from now … what word or phrase will fit him best, so to speak. Do you think it will be that same phrase … or something entirely different?

I’d like you to take a few moments now, to think of a word or phrase that best fits your own life, right at this moment. If someone were to write a biography of your life right now, what word or phrase would best summarize you, what word or phrase would define YOU. Maybe not so much what you think of yourself, but what would others think of you after reading this biography of you. Maybe you remind people of someone well-known in history. Because it may be tough to put your life into a single word or phrase, you can have up to three – but if you have more than one, consider which one is the best fit. So, let’s give it about 15-20 seconds, and please start now … <long pause> …

There’s probably an endless list out there, but we’ll just talk about a few. How many of you had something to do with your career in your list – great lawyer for the underdog, terrific 3rd-grade teacher, top-notch engineer, something like that? …<hands up>… How many of you had it as your top selection? Now, who had something to do with your role in your family in your list – wonderful mother, loving grandfather, husband, wife, son, daughter, aunt, something like that? How many of you had it as your top selection? How many had a personality trait in your list – generous, compassionate, something like that? How many of you had it as your 1st selection? (Hang on, we’re almost there.) How many had a hobby or other part of your life in your list – modern art critic, music lover, organic vegetable gardener, something like that? How many of you had it as your 1st selection? Finally, and please don’t raise your hands for this one, how many had something pertaining specifically to your faith in your list – looking for something very specific, maybe Christ-like, faithful follower of Christ, organizer of food
kitchens for the poor, consistent volunteer for Saint’s Place, dedicated Religious Ed teacher, something like that? How many of you had it as your 1st selection – again, no hands? Please keep that in mind as we go forward here.

Let’s jump over to our Gospel reading for today, right at the mid-point of Mark’s Good News. The passage today is sometimes called the pinnacle of Mark’s Gospel, because it shifts, both for the disciples of Jesus and for the readers—that includes us, folks—it shifts from telling about Jesus, His biography up to that point in time, to what’s going to happen to Him, to His ministry, what He is all about, His complete purpose among them and us, and what is expected of those who want to follow Him. So, at that particular point in time, He asks His disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” Word has gotten out about Him, His biography is out there. It’s not written, but people have heard about Him. The first two answers are very desperate attempts to define Him—John the Baptist had been beheaded, and the return of Elijah was thought to usher in the day when God will judge His people. The third expression, “one of the prophets,” was a weak attempt to define Him—Jesus had been doing things no prophet had done before. So, Jesus asked His disciples, as He is asking those who read His Good News, as He is asking us, “But who do YOU say that I am?” Peter answered “You are the Christ.” “Christ,” from “Christus,” Greek for “Messiah”, which means “the anointed One,” referred to the long-awaited liberator king of Israel.

But, hold on! The biography-to-date is only part of the story. Jesus knows the rest, and from here on, that is His focus—what will happen to Him, His suffering and ultimately, His glory, and what His disciples must do. They can’t continue to be bystanders in the crowd, watching the miracles, watching the exorcisms—if they truly believed in Him, if they truly wanted to be His disciples, they must deny themselves, that is, reject their self-centeredness and abandon themselves to the Will of God, they must take up their crosses in life, and they must follow Him.

Who do YOU say Jesus is, and I’m including myself in that? Really … who do you say He is? You know His biography, you know the whole story—you’ve heard it many times. And … if you truly believe what you say you do, each and every week during the Profession of Faith, what are you doing about that? How do others see you? Would you make any changes in your life or lifestyle that would change your biography? … See this coin (that I’m holding up)? There are two sides—you can’t have just one side. You can’t say that you believe in Christ, truly believe in Christ, on this one side, without it impacting your whole life and you doing something about it, on the other side. In our Second Reading today, James is basically saying the same thing—“Faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead.” He’s referring to people who say they believe in Christ and the Gospel, but they’re bystanders, very little of their faith shows up in how they live their lives. Bringing that forward to today—how can each of us truly improve on being disciples of Christ, and not be bystanders? It’s a real challenge in our faith.

I’ll finish up with a few related items.

• The first one you might have heard about—a few weeks ago, James Harrison, a linebacker for the Pittsburgh Steelers, caused quite a stir on ALL the media—television, publications, even social media. He showed what were called “participation trophies” given to his 6 and 8 year-old sons for basically showing up at their sports events—not small objects of a few inches but rather large awards. He returned them because he felt that they didn’t reflect the effort the boys put in—he felt that the trophies weren’t earned by his sons. Many people agreed with what he did, others didn’t. Now, I’m not going to
take sides on this one, at least not publicly, but the boys are quite young. Most of us here aren’t young children. I’m certainly not suggesting that we earn our way into heaven by our works, but as grown-ups, we are challenged to be more than bystanders in our Christian faith. Look around you. It’s difficult not to recognize that Christians everywhere are being challenged because of their faith … especially in the Middle East, but increasingly more so right in our own nation. Aren’t we being called to defend what we believe, by what we buy, by what we watch, by what we participate in, probably every day of our lives?

- Second, let’s consider that biography subject again and look at how it can change over time. In the mid-90’s, Jim Kelly would have been primarily remembered for his success as a Bills quarterback, but now, that biographical phrase might read, “great Buffalo Bills quarterback who used his success to promote advocacy towards understanding Krabbe’s, a rare childhood disease.” I’m sure you can think of others whose lives have changed, and therefore their biographies. Look at Augustine.

- Finally, some months back, I was chatting with a new acquaintance and she commented on a family we both knew, “they’re such a wonderfully spiritual family.” I wonder if that phrase would make it into their biography years from now?

Really … who do WE say Jesus is? And, if we truly believe what we say we do, then what are we doing about that? How will OUR biography read? It’s not too late to change it.