

Who Do You Say That I Am?

August 27, 2023
Matthew 16:13-20

Prayer: God of ancient story and present moment may the words I offer in reflection, be acceptable to you and echo your wisdom in our time. Amen

The American singer, Joan Osborne, put out a song in 1995, the year my eldest son was born. It was written by Eric Bazillian and produced by Rich Chertoff. It became a hit that same year, peaking at number four in the United States and topping charts in Australia, Canada, and Sweden. The song was titled "One of Us" and it was nominated for three Grammy Awards.

The song caught the attention of Church folks everywhere because it was a song about God and us - and it was being played on the radio – it was a “mainstream” song. The song also raised some interesting questions about God. And some where uncomfortable about those questions. “What if God was one of us?... Just a stranger on the bus trying to make his way home.”

Let's have a listen.

VIDEO

Some in the church or Christian community were offended by the song, taking it as a watering down of the majesty of God or the otherworldliness of God. The idea of meeting God as a stranger on the bus seemed to some folks to cross a line, it bordered upon blasphemy.

On the other hand, some in the Christian community, celebrated the song as it seemed to affirm what the gospel teaches - that God is very present and meets us in very real human beings. I'm thinking the best example of this gospel truth would be, the person, the very real human being, Jesus of Nazareth.

Sometimes we forget that Jesus lived a very human life. We often encounter Jesus in the lofty doctrines of the church, in the grandeur of a stained glass window, or in a piece of classic art with a halo hovering over his head. (We have rarely see a stranger on the bus with a halo over his head.)

It is a challenge for us to put ourselves in the shoes of the first followers of Jesus; Peter, Bartholomew, Mary Magdalene, James, John, Salome, people who first met Jesus as a human being.

Last week we talked about Jesus making a mistake – encountering the Canaanite woman with a daughter that was ill. Jesus was dismissive and closed minded in that encounter until he was challenged to see his ministry differently. Jesus disciples would have witnessed this transformative encounter, they would have seen Jesus lack of compassion and they would have been there for Jesus change of mind

and act of healing. From the very beginning of their relationship with him, his humanity would have been clear but also there would be wonder, there would be awe, there would be more than they could explain. Where did He get this extraordinary authority to speak with such boldness and conviction, words which were such a breath of fresh air? How was it that His prayer, His touch could bring healing to people who had no hope. What kind of compassion could provide a community of acceptance for all kinds of people, so many of whom were excluded from all other places in that society?

Some, who were outraged by Jesus' lifestyle and ministry, said, "He gets it from the Devil." But others saw Him in the tradition of the great prophets, "another Jeremiah or Elijah," they said. Still others found the spirit of the recently executed John the Baptist, reborn in Jesus. There was speculation everywhere. Finally, according to the Gospel, there came a time in the experience of his closest followers, when Jesus asked them point blank, "how about you, what do you think?" - And Peter -----said the biggest thing he could, "you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Now - Peter's answer does not connect easily to our time. We are not a part of a society that is eagerly awaiting a Messiah, nor do we live in a world that is filled with gods like the Greco -Roman world. Biblical scholars suggest that Peter's answer reflects the times that Matthew's Gospel was written, when the church, toward the end of the first century, is proclaiming Jesus as Messiah to the Jewish community, and as the Son of God to the Gentiles.

If Peter's answer connects more readily to that time, than this time, then perhaps the gem of wisdom in this passage is not so much the answer to the question that Peter gave but rather the answer we would give in our time. "Who do you say that I am?" After all of these years we have not exhausted the meaning, the power the beauty that the life of Jesus expresses, and so the question comes across the years to address each generation, "Who do you say that I am?"

The disciples first met Jesus as a human being, and they came to understand that God was somehow present, active, speaking, giving, healing through this human life. Our faith is not so much resting on the hope that Jesus is like God, as if we were experts on what God is like, but our faith is resting on the hope that God is like Jesus; compassionate, forgiving, accepting, welcoming, passionate about justice with an eye to those on the edges.

If Jesus is not fully human, if he is of different stuff than ourselves, then, I think the Christian faith becomes ancient history. We go back 2000 years to an event in a far away time and place, and the faith becomes a kind of hero worship. But if Jesus is human as we are human, then the faith becomes absolutely current, pertinent, and awaiting our response. What Peter and the other disciples confronted was the incarnation, the presence of God in the human, God as one of us. The challenge and the invitation that Jesus holds before us is the possibility that we too, as human beings, can be the temples of God's presence, the vehicles of God's action. We can become the body of Christ. If we affirm God in Jesus, we must be open to the possibility of God in ourselves.

If that sounds too lofty and theological, think of it in terms of the incident that arises out of a story surrounding the Polish pianist, Paderewski. A mother wanted to encourage the progress of her young son at the piano and so she bought two tickets to a Paderewski performance. When the night arrived, she found their seats near the front of the concert hall and they eyed the large Steinway parked by itself on the stage. Soon the mother found a friend to talk with and she did not notice the boy slip away. When 8:00 p.m. arrived the house light dimmed, the spotlights came on, the Steinway was bathed in light, and only then did this mother notice that her son was seated at the piano bench, where he began innocently to plunk the keys in a rendition of Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star. The audience roared, his mother gasped, but before she could retrieve her son, Paderewski himself appeared and moved quickly towards the keyboard. "No, don't quit, keep on playing," he whispered to the boy. And reaching past him with his left hand the Master began improvising a bass part, and then with his right hand, he reached around on the other side of the boy to add a running obbligato. The crowd was spell bound and the piece concluded in thunderous applause as the boy announced, "I didn't know I could do that."

That's incarnation. We are only human; we do not feel worthy or able, but by some miracle of grace, it is the human that God uses. God whispers in our ear, "don't quit, keep on playing," and as we continue, we are lovingly enfolded, graciously inspired, and from our shaky efforts something wonderful can emerge.

"Who do you say that I am?" If we meet Jesus, like Peter, as a human being, if we affirm Him as one in whom God is present and active, we are not only saying something about Jesus. We are opening ourselves to a possibility. We are standing at the edge of knowing something about ourselves.

What if God is one of us?

Amen

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