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“Who Do You Let Tell You Who You Are?”

Mark 8:27-33

Last Sunday, here in worship at St. John’s, we conducted our Senior Sunday service. We celebrated the seniors growing up as a part of this congregation; and we congratulated them as the Class of 2009. At their High School ceremonies, their completion of high school will be acknowledged and they will be pronounced as “graduates.” Still others have recently graduated from college or perhaps received a law degree. It is now part of their identity. And when someone completes their doctorate, they are henceforth given the title of “doctor.” Names and titles have a meaning, and certain assumptions are often made about a person on the basis of those titles or labels.

In our text this morning Peter identifies Jesus by the title of “Christ.” The title Christ comes from the Greek and means “the Lord’s anointed.” It is essentially the Greek rendering of the Hebrew word “Messiah.” But even as Jesus asks Peter, “Who do you say that I am?” he does not allow Peter to define what that means. Like most Jews of that day when Peter used the term “Messiah” he had a certain idea of what it meant. One common Jewish understanding of the term is that the Messiah would be the one who restored Israel to its former glory. Yet for Jesus, being the Lord’s anointed meant something different, and part of that difference is that it would entail personal suffering on his part. This may have been the reason that Jesus told Peter to tell no one he was the Christ. It simply would have created confusion about the mission and purpose of his ministry.

Yet Peter does not accept suffering as part of what it means for Jesus to be the Christ and he rebukes Jesus. Jesus responds by saying, “Get behind me Satan, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Jesus puts a harsh label on Peter, but he does say why. We should also remember that Peter will remain one of the twelve and become one of the leaders of the early church. It is not a permanent judgment. Nevertheless, the theme of Christ’s passion will be the focal point of Mark’s gospel from Peter’s confession onward. The entire second half of the book anticipates his crucifixion.

We should keep in mind that all of the gospels were composed after the fact, after the story had unfolded. And the significance of Christ’s suffering was not that he had a death wish or that God had a death wish for him but that through his suffering Jesus revealed the depth of God’s love for humanity. God’s love would not be turned aside. Christ’s mission and ministry would not be turned aside by other labels either, such as “blasphemer,” “drunkard,” “glutton,” “friend of tax collectors and sinners,” and “one who does not honor the Sabbath.” Jesus continued to be what he was about - extending God’s love and grace to everyone, whether some thought everyone should be able to receive it or not. And indeed, it cost him his life. If we look later in Mark’s gospel at Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, we will see that he did not desire to suffer, but that he knew it may be necessary. Just before Jesus is betrayed by Judas unto his death he prays, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want” (Mark 14:36). Here we see both the humanity and divinity of Christ. We also see what the identity of Christ means to Jesus – obedience to God. He will allow God to tell him who he is and what he should do. And, as has been personified by Christ, our goal as Christians is to allow God to be the one who ultimately tells us who we are.

Yet some openness and humility is necessary if we are to hear God’s voice. We have to be open to listening, not presuming to know all the answers. I’d never really heard of Wiley Drake until the last week or so. Perhaps I should have because he was once a high-ranking official in the Southern Baptist Convention and was also the running mate of former presidential candidate Alan Keyes. Drake is publicly and staunchly pro-life on the issue of abortion. In light of this he was asked in a recent interview what he thought of the shooting death of abortion

provider George Tiller. Drake called the death of Tiller “an answer to prayer” and said that “in all honesty...I’m glad that he is dead.” When asked if he was praying for the death of anyone else, Drake responded that there were several. He said “The usurper in the White House is one, B. Hussein Obama.”

“Are you praying for his death?”

“Yes.”

“So you are praying for the President of the United States to die?”

“Yes.”

Drake went on to explain, “I believe the whole Bible...and part of the Bible is imprecatory prayer – words of judgment in the Psalms prayed back to God...If he does not turn his life around, I am asking God to enforce imprecatory prayers that are throughout Scripture that would cause him death, that’s correct...I think it is appropriate to pray the word of God. I’m not saying anything. What I am doing is repeating what God is saying.”

When asked if he thought others might be praying imprecatory prayers for him Drake said, “Well that’s certainly possible but that’s in God’s hands not mine.”

When asked if he knew the will of God he replied, “In some cases I do. Not in all cases. I know that if I do die right now, I’ll go to heaven because I have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.”

When challenged as to why he called the president “B. Hussein Obama,” he denied calling him that because it made him sound like a Muslim. “I call him that because it’s his name.”

I question that. There is a distinct difference between allowing God to tell you who you are and telling God who he is. It is one thing to have your own views. It is another to project your views onto God and then claim that are from God. Yet it is one way some religious people have used in order to establish their own identity and that of others, and it comes with the benefit of certainty. Just as an aside here, if you are looking for a certainty to hang your hat on I’ll give you one of mine. Anytime you are actively wishing ill on somebody you are probably in the wrong (at least in part). That’s pretty much antithetical to God’s will for each one of us.

But how do we come to certainty? In this life I don’t think we ever do entirely. If we have not calcified ourselves with claimed certainty, we are always growing, always learning. And this is the critical point - we don’t have to know everything in order to live. It is in living that we begin to know. We live our lives forward, but we process them backwards. It is looking at what we did and understanding why we did it that is more instructive than what we claim we will do. And yet we are not automatically confined by our past – Peter certainly wasn’t confined by his failures. We learn about ourselves, others, and God by living in relationship. And relationships develop over time. It is one thing to make statements about God, but quite another to experience God in the depths of your being.

Let us consider the person of Moses – aside from God, the central figure of the Hebrew Bible. He is one who will be the mediator of God to the Hebrew people, the giver of the law, and the liberator of the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage. That’s what he will become, but let us recall his initial response to God’s calling.

The Lord - “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt...I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them...I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt...Go and I will be with you.”
Moses – “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? Suppose they do not believe me. I have never been eloquent, but am slow of speech. Who shall I say sent me? What if they ask me your name?”

The name the Lord tells Moses is YHWH, the Hebrew first person of the verb “to be.” Yet the tense is unclear. It can be translated as “I AM WHO I AM” or “I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE.” The name itself stresses God’s freedom to act as he will. God will be known as he is experienced. And Moses will go from a doubtful and

reticent man to the leader of the Hebrews. But it is a process. He is in an ongoing conversation with God as he lives his life and carries out his mission. Slowly, and sometimes with resistance, he allows God to tell him who he is.

And aside from his own inner voices, Moses battles the resistant voices of the Pharaoh and sometimes the Israelites themselves.

Because we are social, relational creatures, the voices of others do matter to us. Indeed they can be instructive, enlightening us to our blind spots. Yet for some they can be all-consuming. There is a scene in Arthur Miller's play *Incident at Vichy* in which an upper-middle class professional is brought before the Nazi authorities in World War II. The Nazis have infiltrated his town and are interrogating people they suspect to be Jews. As the man goes before the Nazi authorities he shows them his credentials – his university degrees, his letters of reference from prominent citizens, and so on. When he is finished the Nazi authority finally asks him, "Is this everything you have?" The man nods affirmatively. The Nazi throws it all in the wastebasket and tells him: "Good, now you have nothing." The man, whose self-esteem had always depended on the respect of others, is emotionally destroyed.

Some of you may be familiar with the former pastor at Riverside Church in New York William Sloane Coffin. Before his tenure at Riverside he served as the chaplain of students at Yale University. One of the tasks he was frequently asked to do was to write letters of recommendation for college seniors applying to graduate school. Often times he would write these letters to the Dean of admissions of graduate schools such as Columbia Law or Harvard Medical. In these letters Coffin would frequently write something like this: "This student will undoubtedly be in the bottom quarter of the class. But surely you will agree with me that the bottom quarter should be just as carefully selected as the top quarter. What would you be looking for in the bottom quarter if not all the sterling extra-curricular qualities so eminently embodied in this candidate?" Coffin would then go on to say how conscientious and caring this individual was. Almost invariably, the student's feeling would be hurt when they saw the recommendation letter.

"How do you know I'm going to be in the bottom quarter of the class?"

"The evidence is all in, isn't it?"

"Well you didn't have to tell them."

Never mind that the student was graduating from Yale. Never mind that the student was somewhere way up in the 99th percentile of all college students in the nation. And never mind that Coffin said that they were a super human being. If the student wasn't going to be in the top part of the class, he or she felt inadequate. This illustrates the power of higher institutions of learning to tell us who we are.

About a month or so ago, I got a call at home from a man in his 30's. He had gotten my number off of the church voicemail. When he called me, he was utterly distraught. He said,

"I have got to speak to somebody. I've called hundreds of churches just trying to speak to somebody. I am HIV positive and I've been like that for over a year now. But just the last couple of days, when I look in the mirror, I feel like I'm looking at somebody who is getting ready to die. I really feel like I need to plan my funeral."

Me – "Have you talked to ANYBODY about this?"

Man – "No, that's why I'm calling you. I've been alone and awake in my apartment with the blinds pulled down for 48 hours. It's been two full days since I've been able to sleep."

The first thing I told him was that he needed to see a doctor to find out if his condition was in fact that serious. But looking back, the second thing I told him was much more significant.

Me – "You need to tell your mother."

Man – "I don't want to tell my mother. I don't want to hurt her."

Me – “Don’t you think that if you don’t tell her and that you do die, don’t you think that would hurt her worse? Don’t you think that even with the worst things in life, that somebody who truly loves you would want to experience them with you? You might ought to go to the doctor to verify your condition – sometimes in isolation we can view things as worse than they are – but right now, what I think you really need to do is to tell your mother. Look, if anybody will love you it’s your mother. So tell her about this, because if it is true that you might die soon, she would want to know. She would want to be there for you and express her love and concern for you – even if it does hurt her. I’m sure it will hurt her, but don’t you think that she would rather know now than find out after the fact – to be able to do nothing about it, to be able to say nothing about it, to be able to play no part except to know that you died all alone. I’ve got to think that would make her feel terrible. I think that would increase her pain dramatically. I think she would be much worse off than if she were able to communicate her love and concern for you. You need to allow her to do that. I have just got to think that you will both be better off if you share this with her.”

I told him I would check up on him the next day and when I did, he told me that he had been able to get some sleep the night before and that his mom was coming over in a few minutes after she got off from work. I called back one more time, the following day, and when I did he had multiple family members visiting with him. At that point I knew I had played my part and told him that I would continue to pray for him.

What happened was that a young man was paralyzed by fear. To be sure, there is a grave reality that he must face, but also he was paralyzed by the label of AIDS and some of the things he had heard about that label. It made him identify himself in a certain way. He wondered if he was going to hell. He said to me, “I’ve heard preachers say that people who have AIDS are going to hell. Do you think I’m going to hell?” I told him, no, I didn’t, and that I believe that God is much less desirous to punish people than some people are to have God punish people. Later he told me, “You know, I’ve been thinking. There are babies that are born HIV positive. I wouldn’t think that God would send them to hell.”

I couldn’t take away the reality of HIV. I couldn’t change the way some people will judge him because of it. But I could help him remove the label of AIDS that he had put upon himself and internalized about what it meant to be a person with AIDS. I don’t know what his exact prognosis is, but at least he will now be able to face it honestly. He will be able to tell his mom he is sorry and that he loves her. And she, in turn, will be able to tell him she loves him. He will no longer have to go through this alone.

What are the things we allow to shape our inward being? Who do we let tell us who we are? We will become who we become based on the voices we decide to listen to and how deeply we internalize them. Like Moses before God we are called to go forward. I can’t tell you who you are, but I can tell you this – We have been given this life as a gift. And we have the capacity to be in relationship with the God that created us. We have the ability to learn to listen to his voice. And though we are all sinners, who have made our mistakes, we are loved by God. And God’s love doesn’t seek out value as a pre-requisite, it proclaims you valuable already and then seeks to create even more value. May each of us be open to the voice of God.