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Who Do You Say that I Am?

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Sunday, August 20, 2017

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Mark 8:27-33, Galatians 3:23-29

I'd like to open our sermon with a simple question. A simple question that's probably one of the hardest questions you have ever dealt with in your life.

Who are you?

Allow me clarify. I'm not asking what you do for a living, where you go to school, what neighborhood you live in? No, the question is much simpler, much more difficult than that. *Who are you?*

If I were to ask you to turn to your neighbor and answer this question, do you know where you'd begin? Can you name yourself for who you are?

We shared an extended exercise on our high school mission trip, exploring this and other "simply hard" questions about identity. Who are you? What are your gifts? What do you hold most dear? What will your life's legacy be?

Exploring questions of identity during a week of community, service and worship makes a lot of sense. It's not exactly a secret that adolescence is a time of searching for identity. I think it is a closely guarded secret that

many if not most of us adults are still trying to figure this identity thing out, as well.

Who are you?

Busy and bustling as we all are, do we have the time or space or courage needed to search ourselves and answer that question?

I've been fascinated by this morning's gospel text: Jesus, asking the disciples, "Who do people say that I am? Who do you say that I am?" When I read this text from my own place of human vulnerability, I can't help but wonder if Jesus himself may have been searching, just like us?

Who do they say that I am? Who do you say that I am? Who am I and what am I supposed to do? What if I'm not good or strong enough to do it?

These are the questions that spur midlife crises: hinge moments in our lives when we may feel as though grasping at straws if we forgo the hard work of knowing ourselves. Could it be that Jesus, like us, is asking this "who" question from a place a near desperation?

Our identities our fluid and complex, and certainly we need the context of community to work out who are we, but most of us spend so much time worrying and wondering what others think about who we are that we have a hard time knowing, finding and trusting in who we are ourselves.

This identity question has been ringing on a communal level with shaking alarm this week while we as a nation try to wrap our heads around the startling demonstration of white supremacy, domestic terrorism, and hate in Charlottesville last weekend. Who are we as a country that such hate speech, symbols and slogans were being vaunted on a college campus and in public streets? Who are we as a country that young men finding their identity and purpose in Neo-Nazism?

Echoing on airways and Facebook feeds is a continuous drumming of disbelief: *How is this happening? Who are these people? Who am I and what should I do in the midst of all of this?*

I've heard many and read many acclaims of people saying this... this is... not my country, not my story, not history, not my people, not my hope.

But of course, this is our country, this is our story, and you and I, we are the Church. So if we want to change this story, then we need to know who we are as we engage in the conversation around race and nationalism that is unfolding in our country.

Like many civil and faith leaders this past week, national leaders of the PC(USA) issued a statement unequivocally condemning the sin of white supremacy and racism, while renewing the church's commitment to disrupting both in its work for justice, equity and peace.¹

I give thanks for this prophetic voice and vision of the church and its passionate call to justice. We need to say and hear those words. Racism and white supremacy are idolatry and sin. They are human corruptions and not of the Divine.

I give thanks for these words, but I think I am even more grateful that they didn't stop here, but instead, continued the conversation by recognizing our own complex history and identity in the face of our gospel work.

"...even as we give thanks [for the presence and faithful witness of church members who stood against hate in Charlottesville]," the statements reads, "We must acknowledge the church's complicity... and confess the church's failure in challenging and disrupting white supremacy and racism. Too

¹ The PC(USA) leaders responsible for composing the statement were General Assembly co-moderators Jan Edmiston and T. Denise Anderson, Presbyterian Mission Agency Interim Executive Director Tony De La Rosa, and General Assembly Stated Clerk J. Herbert Nelson, II. Text of the full statement may be found at <https://www.pcusa.org/news/2017/8/14/pcusa-leaders-condemn-white-supremacy-racism/>

often we have accepted the status quo. Too often we have stood silent in the face of injustice and oppression.

White supremacy and racism stand in stark, irreconcilable contradiction to God's intention for humanity. We acknowledge that Scripture has been misused to justify white supremacy and racism. However, we proclaim that the Bible's message presents a far more consistent and insistent witness to God's love for diversity and justice."²

It's a beautiful statement because of its honesty and transparency. It named our gifts, commitments and better actions, even while naming our sins, faults and failings. Above all, it named the will and way of God. This statement comes from a church that knows its identity, past and present, and the future it claims in hope. And it's a statement that needs to be witnessed in *our* lives, as well.

Though it's tempting to separate ourselves from the emotional weight of these topics, or to engage them at an intellectual distance, we must learn to engage from the places of our identity – to speak out while searching in – working from that deep place in which love and justice are written tenderly upon our hearts.

We are at a hinge moment and it all comes back to those big, simple questions... *Who am I? Who are we?*

Enter this beautiful gospel passage with Jesus and his closest disciples. Mark is an action-packed gospel. Every moment in its frantic-paced passages leads up to this suspended exchange: this questioning of the identity of Jesus. *Who is he? Who will he become? What will it mean for his followers?*

² PC(USA) statement condemning white supremacy and racism, pcusa.org

Biblical scholars cite this passage as a literary and theological hinge; the single most important passage in the whole of the gospel, for it reveals the truth of Jesus' identity that only he has known all along: Jesus is the Messiah, and nothing will ever be the same.³

Though I am tempted to read Jesus' urgent questioning - *Who do they say that I am? Who do you say that I am?* - from a place of vulnerability and searching, this is simply not the case. Jesus knows who he is. This is not some mid-life or mid-ministry crisis. It's a mid-gospel reveal.

Countless sermons, books, dissertations, and devotions have been written about just what this means that Jesus is the Messiah. Today... today, I ask us to step back and wonder at what may be one of Jesus' greatest strengths. He knows who he is. He understands and even embraces his identity, both human and divine.

Jesus knows his gifts and graces, his desire to teach and pray and heal. He shares these freely from places of deep love and mercy. But he also knows the hard things that come with his identity. He knows that he will suffer, and must suffer freely in service of others. He probably knows that his will be a lonely road.

One that, ultimately, he will have to walk alone. This too Jesus embraces from a place of deep love and mercy.

I doubt that Jesus could so faithfully walk the road before him road without knowing fully and faithfully who he is. But by the grace of God, Jesus does and Jesus will.

³ Jeffery S. Siker, "Exegetical Perspective" in *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, eds. Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), p. 237, 239.

And if we are to follow Jesus, then it's important that we not only know this Messiah, but that we follow in his steps and knowing ourselves, as well.

That's what it's going to take. Honest soul-searching and self-work. The courage to name our fears, failings and prejudices, even as we name our gifts and graces. It means speaking out while also searching in; leading from our identity, even if we're working to change that identity. This is as true of our advocacy, as it is of our worship, our service, our care.

In short, it takes being and bringing all of ourselves to the table, trusting that God can handle us – all of us – as we are. That's why we gather each week to confess our sins, hear God's Word, and pray for the hurts of our lives and world.

I hold dear that we are a congregation that has been asking these questions of identity, gifts, value and purpose throughout its history. The opening of the ODOF conversation has served as another hinge moment in our life together. To step faithfully into this possibility, we have had to ask ourselves again and again, who are we? What are our core values? What do we hold most dear? Before I arrived and before even a single drawing was considered, some 50+ listening group sessions were held, all in an effort to discern how to faithfully and authentically embrace another new chapter in our congregation's story. Yet, even with all of the incredible gifts of new spaces, of secure parking, a new youth room, millions in outbound mission dollars, a new youth room, open doors, accessible entrances, and a new youth room - even as all of these incredible, inspiring new aspects of our community are blooming up around us... this *gift* of self-searching identity work may be the greatest fruit we have to share. We have room to learn and grow, for sure, but have delved deep. We know who we are and where God is leading us, and that is an incredible gift.

Jesus knows and leads from his identity in service of God's love and justice. And when the Church is at its best, when *we* are at our best, so do we.

So may we live and work for the day when the promises of divine grace, love and welcome may be not only written upon our hearts, but spoken from our lips, witnessed in our lives and policies, and demonstrated by the strength and our care and conviction.

May we may know and love ourselves for who we are

May we may know and love our neighbors for who they are

As we together seek to know and follow Christ

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer ~10:00 am Worship

Margaret McCray

Wondrous Creator God, you dreamed and imagined and brought into being a universe of awesome beauty and immensity. Tomorrow, in our small corner of your majestic creation, our sun and moon will dazzle and silence us as we see and feel the architecture of your artistry. May we be inspired to be more mindful of how we treat the natural beauty and abundance of our planet as she makes her way among the mysteries of the heavens.

Just now, as we baptized these children we celebrated and acknowledged the abundant possibility you created in each of your children. We promised to nurture them and instruct them in the ways of love and justice. How it must grieve you, our loving Parent, that as we grow into our adulthood from the wide open spaces of our childhood dreams and aspirations we can lose our way, neglecting and even denigrating the unique beauty within ourselves and within every person we meet: the different but equally useful and remarkable talents you endow us with; the different ways we express our sexuality; our different colors of skin and varied cultural traditions and life experiences; the different and deeply spiritual ways we worship you. Forgive us, Loving God, for making our lives tiny and restricted, contenting ourselves with small, selfish ideas and actions. Forgive us for cutting ourselves off from engaging with our sisters and brothers from all over this exquisite home you gave us to live in, a home we are rapidly destroying by our thoughtless abuse of its once abundant resources. Heal us, mend us, embolden us, Gracious God. We pray for those who live in fear and anger, for those who know the horror and grief of terrorist attacks, for those who live in poverty and hunger, for those in the midst of war, displacement and hatred, for those affected by drought, mudslides and the effects of climate change. The world cries out for us to

be vessels of the love you created in us at our birth, the love you poured out in Jesus the Christ, who showed us how to live that love. Give us energy and commitment to act on behalf others. Embolden us to live lives of generosity and compassion, to show kindness and act justly towards all people. Give us courage to speak out against injustice, to honor the rich, fertile multitude of the different bodies, talents, skills, traditions and imaginations you have given us. Heal our wounded hearts, help us to nurture the unique possibilities of our own bodies and minds. May we go to sleep each night and wake each morning knowing that whatever the day may bring we will meet it with gratitude and love in our body, mind and soul, for it is from this deep well that we draw the love and justice we show others. This is what saves us. This is what gives us hope. This is what inspires us. This is how you created us to be. Amen.