“Who Are You?”

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John 1:19- 23, 29-34

19 This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?"
20 He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah."
21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No."
22 Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"
23 He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord,' " as the prophet Isaiah said…
29 The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!
30 This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'
31 I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel."
32 And John testified, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him.
33 I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'
34 And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

Sermon

That’s a good question and one that we likely asks ourselves quite often. It’s also a question that we are constantly asked by others. But these three little words can also vary widely in meaning, depending upon the intonation, emphasis and punctuation.

“Who are you?” can be a simple, straight forward and open question of basic curiosity. “I don’t know you so tell me who you are?” WHO, are You!? Is less of a question and more of an accusation. As in “just who do you think you are?” Or, “I don’t like who I think you are.” Or when slowly and slightly whispered, “who… are… you?” can come from a place of incredulous and confused wonderment. In the end it is a basic question of identity of who we are claiming to be.

In the process of human development we supposedly go through various stages (and this is a very rough outline).

- As an infant we start out totally dependent. We are the center of the world as all our needs and wants are met promptly by those around us.
- Then we hit the “terrible twos” and we begin to realize that we can’t always get everything we want when we want it.
- We then go through a phase where we must make adjustments. We learn that we cannot always get our own way, or that we need to share and we begin to want to model ourselves after our parents and or our friends whom we want to like us. The teenage years can be a bit of a reversion back to the terrible twos, a time of great tension as we both want to be accepted by parents and “fit in” with our friends. We also begin to want to be a bit unique and so start to differentiate ourselves from others, especially our parents.

But what is “adulthood” and when does it begin are two questions that are difficult to pin down. I guess it has something to do with being able to balance our needs, wants and desires with those needs, wants and desires of others? But I wonder if it also has anything to do with something even more powerful - the willingness to sacrifice for and even suffer at times for the good of others? Full human development must also include seeing the humanity not only in ourselves but with equal clarity in everyone else.

However, the outward pressures and internal needs to “fit in” and seek the approval of others can still remain immense throughout our adult lives. John, in our passage this morning, seems to know emphatically who he is! Or at least maybe, who he isn’t.

He is pretty clear that he ain’t no Messiah, nor is he the reincarnation of Israel’s greatest prophet, Elijah! He is just a voice, just one voice, loud and annoying, “crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.' "

John the Baptist’s identity was built upon being the servant of another, the One who has now shown up and who is far greater than he. And if you recall anything about John the Baptist you know then that he didn’t really care about “fitting in” in anyway with the world and religious culture around him. Instead, John sought to “fit in” with the One whom God sent to save the entire world from the effects of sinful behaviors.

John’s seemingly single ambition was to simply “pave the way” for the arrival of that true servant. I have to wonder if we too are not called to take on this same identity?

To identify ourselves as one more voice, as one more person who is busy making preparations for Jesus' arrival? We may not dress like John the Baptist did. We may not have a similar diet, or even the same loud and annoying voice, but we too can meld our own uniqueness into the same seemingly single ambition to do the work that can make Jesus' arrival and maybe the world's acceptance of him just a little bit smoother.

And like John, it all starts by first recognizing that Jesus is already here among us! Jesus is, as we sang, "A child of the poor, the meek and the hungry." Jesus is also within those who are seeking their full humanity through repentance that can radically change lives.

As I look around at you all this morning, I can see that most of us here do not "fit in" with the values of our culture. Some of us are in love with the wrong people, others are poor or homeless, and others of us are recovering from past traumas and from injecting various poisons into our bodies. Many of us advocate for unpopular causes, and I think that all of us want build a better world for everyone while also respecting God's wonderful creation. And some of us think that following Jesus is a pretty good way to get there. For it is in Jesus that we find the light - the way to what is true life! And so sometimes it is really hard for us to compromise our values. And at other times we are truly confused as to why some not only refuse to join us, but instead seem to want to make our efforts even harder?

Aa couple weeks ago I shared about the profound experience that I had as a child gazing up at the night sky. Living on a farm in Kansas allowed me the opportunity to actually see a whole lot of those stars that were up there. As I shared, it made me feel small and insignificant.

I would wonder to myself, "Who am I?" "Nothing much, really," was often my response. I was a very, very small part of the vastness of God's creation. But I had also been told that the Creator of all that, not only knew who I was but also loved me to the point of knowing the number of hairs on my head! Well… that, was and still is, overwhelming.

And I want others to feel that same way! And so I continue to dream of a world where each and every person is treated in such a way that they too feel this great love and unconditional acceptance by the Creator of the Universe! Part of my job is to help show that this is possible. To help show the way to healing that which is keeping me from my true identity as a human being created by a loving God, just one more human being who can also love others in miraculous ways.

We are faced with some pretty big decisions over the next couple of weeks on what to do with our building; do we clean it up or get rid of it? Do we stay put or move somewhere else where the neighbors and maybe the city will leave us alone? Do we stop our ministry to those who are homeless and who are struggling with addiction? Or do we try to “fit in” and become a quieter, less annoying voice in our city? What will be our central identity? Who are we as we prepare the way?

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