

Who We Are and Who We Aren't
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12:39

“Who We Are and Who We Aren't” Pilgrim Church UCC, December 14, 2014—Third Sunday of Advent (John 1:6-8 and 19-28)

Today's Gospel lesson feels like a game of 20 Questions as John the Baptist is in the wilderness being grilled by priests from Jerusalem. Those in power ask him in rapid succession: "Who are you?" "What then? Are you Elijah?" "Are you the prophet?" "What do you have to say about yourself?" We just need a conference room in a police station with a cold cup of coffee on the table and a creepy light shining on poor John to make this feel like an episode of Law and Order. It's intense, these questions demanding to know John's identity.

In Martin Copenhaver's book *Jesus is the Question*, he speaks about identity. About a time when Jesus asked a troubled man, "What is your name?" before he healed him. Martin says that we identify with our names and that in a sense, we are our names. He can't stand when people call him Marty and will say, politely, "My friends call me Martin." [1] He's learned over the years that relationships develop when we know one another's names.

I recall when I was a teenager shopping with my mom at the mall and going off on my own, leaving her to her own devices, only to hear a sharp, "Lauren Ashley!" When I went back to her side saying, "What, I was just over there?" her response was a puzzled, "I know. I didn't say anything." Another mother was calling for her daughter, Lauren Ashley, it seems—but I sure came running at the sound of what I thought was my mom calling my name in a you are so in trouble young lady kind of way.

What's in a name? A lot, apparently. We respond to people knowing us and calling us by name since it's part of our identity. Today we'll explore who John the Baptist is and who John isn't and how John lives out his identity to understand what this story means for us on this Third Sunday of Advent.

Names and titles are funny. This whole conversation with those in power and John the Baptist revolve around his identity. What does John say about himself? He's not the Messiah. He's not Elijah. He's not the prophet. He's "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the Lord' as the prophet Isaiah said." [2] John is successful in witnessing to Jesus because he knows himself. He can easily respond to those questions: "I am not the Messiah." "Are you Elijah?" "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" "No."

There's this great tradition of prophets doing this in the Old Testament. Amos once said, "I am no prophet or a prophet's son." Isaiah said, "Depart from me, for I am a man of unclean lips." Jeremiah said, "Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." [3] Knowing ourselves—who we truly are and who we aren't still matters.

In fact, we seem to be on a constant quest for self-understanding in our society. The three most popular book genres in America over the last twenty years are children's literature, erotica/romance novels, and self-help. USA Today celebrated the twenty-year anniversary of their best seller list by charting how trends have changed, relating that self-help, inspiration, and advice books were most popular between 1993-1998 for whatever reason. Nine of the twenty-five most popular books from that time period included: *Men are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*, and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. [4] The fact that

self-help books are still so popular says a great deal about us (as does children's literature and trashy romance novels, but I'll save that for another sermon, or never.)

Perhaps this need for self-help books means that we're narcissistic and it's all about us and how we can be the best. Perhaps we're genuinely interested in who we are, what makes us who we are, how to be better versions of who we are. Perhaps we feel inadequate or sad or lonely or confused or stressed so we seek guidance from trusty books that promise answers with titles like Don't Sweat the Small Stuff.

Maybe we feel envious of people like John the Baptist who are so sure of themselves. John's being interrogated by the religious authorities for goodness' sakes and can respond with "I am not" and "No" fairly easily. Speaking of self-help, there's so much out there about the art of saying no! We can't be all things to all people and saying no sometimes can be the best way to care for ourselves so we can care for others. Knowing who we are and who we aren't, what we can do and what we can't are perennial issues.

So this is one part of the Gospel text—John the Baptist knows who he is and who he isn't. John knows what he's doing—the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord." And it's rather admirable to encounter a person so grounded in their identity and vocation. You can't help but wonder about the journey John took to be so confidently himself.

The other part of this Gospel text is of course who John is pointing toward. Because he knows that he's not the Messiah, he's not Elijah, and he's not the prophet, John can speak about the one coming after him. John witnesses to the one who will baptize not just with water, but with the Holy Spirit. John witnesses to the Savior.

By witnessing to Jesus Christ, we get less preoccupied with ourselves because our focus goes far beyond us. We do less navel gazing and more looking toward the horizon for the one bringing new life. Though I sometimes struggle with Savior language for Jesus, as I hesitate to think how exclusionary this sounds to people who aren't Christian, I love the concept of Jesus saving us for new life. Not just saving us from sin and death, but saving us for wholeness and love. We can't always save ourselves or each other—that whole saving business, saving us for new life, is what God does.

There's a supposedly true story about Billy Graham, who didn't hesitate to use salvific language for Jesus Christ, arriving in a small town to preach and asking a young boy if he could point him to the post office as he had to mail a letter. The boy obliged and then Billy Graham thanked him, relating that if the boy showed up at the Baptist Church that night, he would hear a sermon about how to get into heaven. The boy responded, "I don't think that I'll be there, you don't even know your way to the post office."

This little young doubter was onto something—is it that easy to tell people exactly how to get into heaven? Is that really the point of what Jesus preached or even Jesus as Savior? Because even Jesus pointed beyond himself to God's saving power, not just for us to get into heaven but to help God create heaven on earth. Don't get me wrong, we do need saving—saving for new life, saving for wholeness, saving for being Christ's presence in the world. If we think that we're not in need of saving, then we're not paying attention to our failures and mistakes and all the ways that we are separate from our best selves, from each other, and from God. Yes, we all need saving. As does our hurting world, our world in desperate need of God's love to mend what's broken as only God truly can. Yes, our world needs saving.

Maybe these ideas can be summed up well by our UCC Constitution, where we read: "The United Church of Christ acknowledges as its sole Head, Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior."

There's no human authority that takes the place of Jesus as the head of the Church or Savior. In line with John the Baptist, we don't presume that we have all the answers and that we're the ones who can swoop in and save the day. We point to the One who is the light of the world. We're not the light, we're here to testify to the light. The light is coming and the joy will be a sight to behold.

In the end, Jesus will one day ask his first disciples: "What are you looking for?" And then, Jesus will say: "Come and see."^[5] It's an open invitation to discover what following Jesus and trusting Jesus is all about. Jesus saves us for new life because he shows us a different Way to relate to one another, our world, and God. We'll soon contemplate what it means that God somehow comes to us in the birth of a helpless baby in a borrowed bed of straw. With John the Baptist as our guide, we'll point to someone who gives hope to a hurting world, who saves us for love's sake, and helps guide our lives. A Savior who asks us: "What are you looking for?" And with an open invitation, bids us: "Come and see." Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Martin Copenhaver, *Jesus is the Question: The 307 Questions Jesus Asked and the 3 He Answered*, 27.

[2] John 1:23, NRSV.

[3] David L. Bartlett, *Pastoral Perspective of John 1:6-8, 19-28 in Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year B, Volume 1*, 70.

[4] Husna Haq, "What books sell best? Self-help, kid lit, and erotica," *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 1, 2013, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Books/chapter-and-verse/2013/1101/What-books-se...>

[5] John 1:38 and 39.