

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House  
Sunday, August 21, 2011

Sermon Notes:

“So, how am I doing?”

Ed Koch, remember...wherever he went he would invariably turn to his audience or gathered supporters and say, “So, how am I doing?”

To understand Jesus’ question to his disciples – perhaps not so much difference between: “Who do people say that I am?” and our colloquial version nearly 2000 years later of “How am I doing?” we need to take a closer look at Matthew for just a minute or two.

To glimpse what was going on, we have to enter into the mind of the author, as best we can. And in this pursuit, we also remind ourselves that the writers of the Gospels were not historians, however they were greatly affected by the history of what was going on. And it was those conditions of their times in which they framed their message so that others could understand them. That simple.

They wrote for the conditions of their times – not for ours. So, understanding the author and the conditions are key in helping us to understand the language of their hearts and its message in our hearts – it is a language that is always the same...the language of love.

Matthew wrote in the time period that followed the fall of Jerusalem after the First Jewish Revolt. It is an historic event that took place on August 29, 70 CE. The Romans, after having been fought back by the Jews, regrouped and destroyed the Temple on that date. It would still be three years before the fortress at Masada would fall. Sadly, that too, would be overwhelmed.

The warring, suffering, and destruction following Jerusalem’s brief period of independence and power, would still be fresh in the minds of the all Jewish people listening to Matthew.

It was a compressed time. Just years following the crucifixion of Jesus, the rise of Jewish independence and power, and the loss of that position, punctuated by the fall of the Temple. People of the time would have a knowledge of over all of that span and the time they now found themselves in. It was a time of understandable chaos, confusion, and what seemed like unpredictable change. And it is that to which Matthew addressed himself.

The Gospel of Matthew is most concerned with where these followers of Jesus could find their place within Judaism and all these changes. This was not about “Christians,” per se. History tells us that it was not until CE 125 in Antioch that the

disciples were even first called Christians. This is some fifty years before that. This was still the Jewish community and Matthew was trying to persuade all who would listen that Jesus, the Jesus, was the Messiah and was the answer for the times. Still, the communities were split. There were at least two distinct groups: those who adhered to the more literal Judaic traditions and those who were moving into a new understanding of Judaism, Jesus's involvement, and the influences of the Greek and Hellenistic culture.

And, what is true of the language of the heart is that years after Matthew quoted Jesus as saying "Who do people say that I am?" – the emerging communities following wars and diasporic movements of people away from oppression and within the shifting times of history – were still asking a variation: "Who was Jesus?" "How does who he was influence who we are?" "Who do people say we are?" It was and continues to be a "heart question and answer."

"Who do I say that I am?" And with the answer one chose, especially then, would come the following questions: "What does that mean?" – and "Will they be coming after me?"

As we have said this week and in previous weeks, Matthew was concerned about establishing Jesus as Messiah in the turbulence of the times. An answer. Jesus was (and is) an answer.

And, in writing his Gospel he was telling a story and weaving together an identity and connection with Jesus to the long tradition of Judaism. A connection in Matthew's Gospel that traces Jesus back, beyond David, to Abraham.

So, tradition, purpose, conditions – and faith of the author all take on a role in what it is the gospels convey: then, the times in between then, and now.

Still, even if the language is different, the dialectic constructed by the author to make the point, the question he used then remains the same now – in our conditions: "Who are we in relation to Jesus?" or "How are we doing in being disciples of his, without all the weight of literal interpretation?"

As you can tell from the sanctuary, we had quite a celebration late yesterday afternoon. Two friends of mine, John and John Lee were married in our sanctuary. With the passage of the New York State Marriage Equality Act, same gender loving couple marriages are legal, as you know. Still, within the church there are some cautionary guidelines about a constitution of ours which, in some places, defines marriage as between a man and a woman – and in other places calls pastors to offered spiritual care to all. Along with other areas of disagreement, these contradictions in our own documents cause us to ask:

"Who do we say Jesus was and is?" and in light of that question "Who do we say we are?" and... "How does that translate into action..."

The Session of this church, now called a Council in our nFOG, is committed to welcoming and extending our pastoral care and opportunities for membership and leadership to all. That means we ordain qualified candidates and we marry those who we would marry, based on their preparedness for marriage. All couples treated the same.

In other words, our understanding of Jesus and our faith – today – accepts the risks of what some might consider the “wrong” view. Still, if Jesus were here before us and asked, “Who do you say I am?” we might answer in part “We say you are the one that calls us to marry loving couples you have brought together to marry, regardless of the gender identity involved.”

And, we expect Jesus would say, “So, what are you waiting for...”

It really is reminiscent of some of the debates we remember Jesus having with the Pharisees and Sadducees.

And of course there is more. Our identity of Jesus in the life of this congregation extends into the world, not just into this room. It goes out those doors into the hard realities of the world, just as the Gospel of Matthew went outside of the rooms and places in which he might have evangelized, out into a world we described earlier. A world of conflict, war, destruction, upheaval, and the relentless pursuit of faith in the midst of it all.

And we are in the midst of it all in many ways.

One of those ways, is that in a few short weeks we will intentionally be engaged in our remembrance of 9/11 – across the country and around the world. It was just ten years ago. How fresh is that in our minds? How much havoc and confusion has the attack on our soil, the destruction of the Towers caused here and worldwide. Just 10 years.

Who has Jesus become for us in this time as a result of this act of violence; how have we been challenged to believe and others challenged in their own faiths to continue to believe following the terror some would foist upon innocent people to make an ideological point? Where is Jesus and our faith in this place or memory and today's reality

Where is Jesus and our faith in another ideological war going on in this country at the moment between the 4% of the population that controls 90% of the wealth of this nation and the middle class that is being squeezed and the poor that seem invisible and victimless by those hoping to crush the size of government and crush or ignore or deny those who might get in the way?

At the reception for my friends last night, the conversation at the table at which I sat ended up in a place with the question of where we would like to see “things” fifty years from now.

Vision is important and the topic for another day. But as part of that conversation, the importance of being present and seeing value and deep meaning in even the simplest of acts of kindness, care, compassion was raised. And the deepest of meaning for these acts and practices is because even in the simplest of ways – or the grandest when we have the chance to make a splash – in all these ways they are an answer to the questions: Who do we say Jesus is? And who do we say we are – informed by the answer to that question.

Compassion is always connected to an act of kindness. When we draw upon our faith and belief traditions, whatever they may be, when we practice the simplest of care within the scope of our ability to do so, we are answering the question that Jesus posed to his disciples. We are setting the priorities straight about what we will do and are willing to risk in doing. We establish the language of the heart that can rise above the hurt and the pain, and even within the hurt and the pain continue to be faithful, remembering and practicing the smallest of acts of caring for one another and allowing ourselves to be cared for, as well.

When we know that, when we realize such things and in the quietest of hearts affirm to God, as we know God, that what we do is because we believe and seek to believe, then we too will in some way hear the same words that Jesus said to Peter, “Blessed are you. I build my hopes and promise upon you. You have the power to truly make a difference, just by living into my name.”

Or to put it another way,

“How am I doing God?”

Just fine, kiddo. Just fine.

Resource notes:

The Gospel of Matthew is concerned with the position of these early Christian churches within Israel, or in its relationship to what we call Judaism. And these are concerns that belong to the time after the fall of Jerusalem. How do these Christian communities, who don't even call themselves Christian, and probably don't even have a consciousness that they're something different than Israel, how do they relate to others who claim to be Israel? And it's very important that Jesus for Matthew is fully a man from Israel. Therefore, Matthew begins his gospel by taking all the genealogy of Jesus; he wanted to show that Jesus was the son of David, and now traces this back to Abraham. For Matthew, Jesus is not the son of David, but he is the son of Abraham. He is truly a man from Israel. And thus Jesus' teaching also is one that is fully in the legitimate tradition of Israel's teaching of the law. So in Matthew, not in any other gospel, we have Jesus saying he has not come to dissolve the law but to fulfill it. And that no part of the law will disappear

Read more:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/matthew.html#ixzz1Vf3ixDK7>

**First Jewish Revolt**, (ad 66–70), Jewish rebellion against Roman rule in Judaea. The First Jewish Revolt was the result of a long series of clashes in which small groups of Jews offered sporadic resistance to the Romans, who in turn responded with severe countermeasures. In the fall of ad 66 the Jews combined in revolt, expelled the Romans from Jerusalem, and overwhelmed in the pass of Beth-Horon a Roman punitive force under Gallus, the imperial legate in Syria. A revolutionary government was then set up and extended its influence throughout the whole country. [Vespasian](#) was dispatched by the Roman emperor Nero to crush the rebellion. He was joined by Titus, and together the Roman armies entered Galilee, where the historian [Josephus](#) headed the Jewish forces. Josephus' army was confronted by that of Vespasian and fled. After the fall of the fortress of Jatapata, Josephus gave himself up, and the Roman forces swept the country. On the 9th of the month of Av (August 29) in ad 70, Jerusalem fell; the Temple was burned, and the Jewish state collapsed, although the fortress of Masada was not conquered by the Roman general Flavius Silva until April 73.

**Second Jewish Revolt**, (ad 132–135), Jewish rebellion against Roman rule in Judaea. The revolt was preceded by years of clashes between Jews and Romans in the area. Finally, in ad 132, the misrule of Tinnius Rufus, the Roman governor of Judaea, combined with the emperor [Hadrian](#)'s intention to found a Roman colony on the site of Jerusalem and his restrictions on Jewish religious freedom and observances (which included a ban on the practice of male circumcision), roused the last remnants of Palestinian Jewry to revolt. A bitter

struggle ensued. [Bar Kokhba](#) became the leader of this Second Jewish Revolt; although at first successful, his forces proved no match against the methodical and ruthless tactics of the Roman general Julius Severus. With the fall of Jerusalem and then Bethar, a fortress on the seacoast south of Caesarea where Bar Kokhba was slain, the rebellion was crushed in 135. According to Christian sources, Jews were thenceforth forbidden to enter Jerusalem.

[Above two references from the Encyclopaedia Britannica]