

Jan Hus Presbyterian Church and Neighborhood House
Sunday, March 4, 2012

Only Your Can Say
©2012 Ray Bagnuolo

Reading: Mark 8:27-38

Who do people say that I am?

I get the question. I'll bet you do, too. Ever been misunderstood? Ever put your heart and soul into something, been clear and transparent as you can be, and no matter what you do – people still don't see it? People still misinterpret it, creating a narrative of their own that they can more easily understand or accept?

“Who do people say I am,” Jesus asked the disciples.

John the Baptist, back from the dead.
Elijah, too, back from the dead.
A prophet of some unknown origin.

Why would Jesus even ask? Didn't he know who he was?

Yes, I believe he did. But as he looked out over the crowds, he must have wondered aloud to those closest to him...

Are the people getting the message – or are they focused on these signs and healings. Is that what they see? I didn't come here to go out as a healer or magician. I came here to proclaim that the kingdom of God is at hand. So at hand that these signs are all around us. These healings are witness to the presence of God. Heck, even the stones are ready to speak out, there is so much God here. Are the people getting the message?

No. There's only one explanation to all these miracles, healings, feedings, charismatic preaching –

must be John the Baptist.
Must be Elijah.
Must be some prophet like in the olden days.

So, then Jesus asks Peter; Peter who in a few minutes would be chastised by Jesus; Peter who in a short time would deny he even knew Jesus; Peter one of the closest to Jesus who often doesn't get it right...

“Peter, who do *you* say I am?”

And Peter, looking for the “Messiah” the “anointed one,” as in *kings* who were anointed and considered messiah; kings about to bring about great change; great upheaval of the injustice and suffering of the times, turns to Jesus and says,

“You are the Messiah!” Jesus! You will soon be our king and we will rule faithfully by your side. There is a great and amazing day ahead. Look around, look at all that is happening: the crowds, the healings, the fervor, enthusiasm – just look. Oh what a great day ahead. As God anointed Saul to be king, you are the next anointed one. The Messiah! And we are going to be rulers with you!”

It is no wonder Jesus said, Peter, *don’t tell anyone this*. In fact he warned them. Don’t make this foolish talk. Even you who have been with me don’t get it.

This isn’t about ruling on earth! This is about the Kindom of God that is here. The presence of God that has no rulers on earth. In fact, there’s probably not too much time before all this causes us so much trouble that we will be under great pressure and persecution. We will be rejected as even being Jews, based on the threat we will be to the powers around us. So much so, it may cause me my life. And when and if it does, I fear not the death of this body, for after the time of transition I will be with my father in heaven. So, don’t go hastening the process by telling everyone I am the Messiah. We need all the time we can get to do all the work we can in proclaiming the kindom of God at hand.”

Of course, Peter, out of his great love for Jesus and his aspirations, perhaps, to be part of the inner circle of the next anointed king, responds to Jesus’ personal, pleading, transparent and direct words by rebuking Jesus for saying such things. Peter rebukes Jesus! He must have seen himself as an adviser to the next ruler...

“No, Jesus. You listen to me. You are on your way to greatness and we are going to be with you. Think of all the good you can do as king. We are going to be enormously famous, powerful. We will change the world for the better.”

Frustrated even with ones who were closest to him, with this one that he had taken under his wing; dismayed that even Peter still had it all wrong, he upbraided him. You Satan. You selfish, dense, one. Do you think I am here for human concerns? You guys are making me crazy. How will I ever succeed in this ministry if even those closest to me don’t get it!”

And so, Jesus, probably pretty worked up by the exchange turns to everyone gathered, assuming now that everyone thinks on one way or another close to Peter. He turns to the crowd and his disciples:

You! Looking for royalty and riches on earth? Forget about it if you are following me. Instead, be ready to carry your cross, your burdens, with all those crosses and

burdens of others. This is not about finding a treasure on earth. This is not about having to have all your trials and tribulations addressed, assuaged, and erased!

This is bigger, greater. This is God. The presence of God here and now that you are missing and ignoring. And if you want to find it, you are going to have to be willing to lay aside what you have come to believe as your life, your aspirations and greed for a life of power, riches, success...you will have to set it aside and carry the Good News of God in your lives to others. That's what this is about. To proclaim the Good News that you are loved by God and of God and we, in reflection of that love, are here to love and care for others.

That's it. Anything else, anything else you think this is about, you will be ashamed of such thinking when the time of your transition comes about. You will realize what you wasted in you pursuing what had no lasting value.

And off in a huff he probably went to pray.

In so many ways, we are much like the disciples. Who we say Jesus is depends on what we want. What we want out of Jesus. And isn't that the same of our relationships with one another. Isn't who we see as "the other" in some ways based on "what we want from them"?

And I am not saying that there is anything wrong of wanting things from others. There is no value associated with that of good and bad. The value is assigned long before we articulate or are aware of what it is we want of others. It is assigned deeply in our motives, the way we love – unconditionally or with conditions; and the way we serve – for our own comfort or willing to be in tension with others when the soul is at risk.

This last week was a very busy week. Among the call of this congregation and community to serve was the memorial service held for Anthony Horton on Wednesday. You probably know that Tony died in a fire, deep in the belly of the NYC Subway system, where he had found some abandoned rooms. Rooms he had wired with electricity and made home.

As I listened to all the wonderful and true things spoken about Tony, there was no spoken sustained outrage about the conditions under which Tony found himself forced to live. Were the topics too difficult to speak of? Was the healing taking place too fragile to address the horror of what it must be like to see no other choice but to view chronic homelessness and living in the dark and among the rats as "that's Tony" or part of some greater romantic notion of urban self-preservation, rugged individualism, finding identity in the despair and loneliness of alcoholism, lived out in part below ground in unsafe, marginalized, and lightless endless tunnels – with little hope in any direction for the darkness offered no direction?

Or were these too difficult to talk about because we knew these things and knew the answers and actions were hard. Were we feeling as though we might have done more

than side with Tony in his choices, even if it meant losing his friendship? Had we become like him, accepting the arguments of the streets are not safe, the shelters are not safe, for the subways that were not safe – because it was easier for us to do. Because it made Tony feel better not to challenge him?

I should say that I don't believe that anything we might have done would have changed what happened. This is not a guilt trip sermon, it is a question about who do we say we are when it comes down to who we say Jesus is. It is a question of what else are we accepting because it is easier to accept than to disrupt. And, yes, what will we do the next time as we remember this time. Is there more meaning for us in the life of Tony and his death than "closure."

Like the disciples that surrounded Jesus, it seems that part of the human condition is to create our own narratives to avoid some of what is most uncomfortable to see or to do. It seems, too, that in the course of discovering what it is we want of Jesus so that we can say who he is to us – another way of saying who we are, ourselves – it seems that the only voice that may ever know is the one we hear inside.

Is it..will it be strong enough when those around us try to persuade us by rebuke or entreaty to accept what we should never accept?

Only you can say.

Only you can say.

Who do people say that I am? Whatever they say, they will never really know. That is up to us to decide.

Only we can say.