



SERMONS THAT WORK

Proper 16 (A)

Questions That Lead to Action

[RCL] Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Caesarea Philippi was a Roman town in Northern Israel right on the Syrian border. There were many religions in the area. The pagan people worshipped in fourteen different temples. Herod the Great built a large temple for the Romans to worship Caesar. In addition, just outside Caesarea Philippi, there is a large rock cliff, hundreds of feet high. Beneath this rock cliff is a cavern filled with water. Greeks considered the cavern the birthplace of Pan, the god of nature, fields, forests, mountains, flocks, and shepherds. For the Greeks, this was a sacred place.

It is here that we meet Jesus in our Gospel passage today. Jesus has been quite busy since healing the Canaanite woman's daughter in our reading last week. If we were to read the passages between last week's reading and today's, we would learn from Matthew that Jesus had cured many, fed four thousand men, plus women and children, with enough left over for seconds, and argued with religious leaders who demanded a sign from heaven confirming his identity. And as if that was not enough, Jesus realized that even the disciples, his trusted friends, did not appear to understand him or his mission.

Legend has it that a spring that once flowed from the mythical site of Pan's cave becomes the Banias River that joins the Jordan River. So here on the road from Galilee to Jerusalem, at this crossroads of various world religions, commerce, and culture, Jesus ponders his mission and wonders about himself. And as we often do when we need to know the truth about ourselves – we ask our closest friends who have journeyed with us through thick and thin and seem to know us best, who also know what others are saying about us – Jesus asked, “What’s the word on the street? Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

The disciples responded as if in a competition. “People say you’re John the Baptist.” “No, they think you’re Elijah.” “Wait, no, some think you’re Jeremiah.” “Yes, but others say you’re one of the prophets.” The disciples’ answers are based on the religious groups they are familiar with and interestingly, Jesus does not affirm or deny their responses. He simply listens as they divulge what they believe they know based on the preferences, ideas, and expert opinions of others. And isn’t that what we do? Our explorations of faith begin with naming what we have heard, examining what has been passed down from our various traditions and reciting by rote the certainties that others have handed to us.

These answers cost us very little; they are safe and good-natured, which is all well and good as they point back to history and tradition. But they lack intimacy. Naming what we have heard from others, repeating what we have inherited from our parents, our cultures, religious beliefs, or peers are good ways to begin our explorations. However, we cannot build our lives of faith on only hearsay. Eventually, the question of who Jesus is needs to become personal.

So, Jesus presses on with one of the most difficult questions among friends – a question that seeks the truth. One that desires no flattery, but an honest answer from the heart. It is only from those we truly love and who love us that we risk the answer to the question “How have *you* experienced me? Who do *you* say that I am?”

Perhaps Jesus was thinking, forget about other people’s theologies and interpretations. Even though they are important, just for now, put aside tradition and creed and reflect on the life we have lived together – the bread we have broken, the miles we have walked, and the burdens we have carried. Remember the tears we have shed – the laughter we have shared. “Who am I to you?”

One can imagine Jesus standing patiently and vulnerably waiting for a response – wondering if his followers understand his mission and vision – if they are willing to take a risk – if they love him enough to make a confession out loud.

Only the bold, reckless, impulsive, and earnest Peter has the courage to blurt out exactly what he is thinking. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God,” Peter responds. We learn from today’s Gospel account that Jesus commends and blesses Peter for his answer, promising the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Yet, in the verses directly following our reading for today, when Jesus describes the suffering and humiliation the Messiah is to endure, Peter backtracks causing Jesus to rebuke him. Peter had set his mind on human and not divine things. Peter knew Jesus was the Messiah but really had no idea what “Messiah” meant.

Jesus’ teaching methods, characterized by the tactical use of questions, mirrored those of the rabbis of his day. His inquiries were often designed to confront his disciples and catalyze change. He was looking for accountability and commitment. According to author Peter Block, “Achieving accountability and commitment entails the use of questions through which, in the act of answering them, we become co-creators of the world... Powerful questions are the ones that cause you to become an actor as soon as you answer them. You no longer have the luxury of being a spectator.”

Peter had answered Jesus’ question correctly, albeit with the help of God, but remained a spectator. He could not accept that the Messiah’s mission involved dying on a cross. Peter’s confession was only the beginning of his exploration of Jesus’ identity. It seems that Peter was living in the gap between knowing the answer to Jesus’ question and living into the answer to the question. There was so much more for Peter to learn before he truly comprehended what it meant to be the Messiah.

Do you truly know what it means to be the Messiah? Who do you say that Jesus is? What stories of Jesus have you inherited? Do you need to unlearn some ideas that were passed down? What religious assumptions are you clinging to simply because they're familiar, safe, or easy? We tend to try fitting Jesus into our own little boxes. Are we living in the gap between knowing and living into our answer to Jesus' question?

Discipleship is a lifelong process, and growth will change our answer to many questions. In his letter to the Romans, Paul appeals to those present – and to us – saying, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God.” Context and location are also important factors that might influence our responses, yet each of us must answer Jesus' question for ourselves.

We can stand up each day and declare, like Peter, that Jesus is the “Messiah, the Son of the living God,” but what difference will that make if we remain spectators? Once we allow Jesus more deeply into our hearts and claim him as our Messiah, we no longer have the luxury of being spectators. We become co-creators and as such, we need to act; and action means living into our answer.

Living into our answer compels us to care and advocate for those experiencing injustice, racism, hunger, poverty, and any other adversity. We are living into our answer when we love one another as Christ loves us – when we offer compassion, forgiveness, hospitality, and healing to a hurting world - when we work to bring about peace and to keep hope alive.

Who do you say that the Son of Man is? If you're not quite there with an answer, ask God to help you with that and to transform you, so that you may discern what is the will of God.

***The Rev. Canon Marcea Paul** serves in the Episcopal Diocese of Texas as the bishop diocesan's chief of staff and previously was the priest for pastoral care at the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd in Austin, Texas. Prior to attending seminary, Marcea had a career in accounting and served on several committees in the Diocese of Southeast Florida.*