

XII Pentecost – August 27, 2017 – Year A – Proper 16

Once you've found your identity—once you know who (and whose) you are—it takes courage and dogged persistence, along with God's gracious help—to maintain that identity.

Look at the Hebrews in Egypt—literally the children of Israel, numberless descendants of the patriarch himself, many of whom, not unlike the Egyptian Pharaoh, no longer knew who Joseph was—suddenly finding themselves tagged for destruction, as we learn from the opening verses of the book of Exodus.

Imagine a regime so “blessed” with an overabundance of able-bodied alien workers that it eventually decided to kill off all the newborn males of that population, in effect thinning the ranks of the future workforce, just to keep things from getting out of hand.

It took a good deal of courage (and perhaps a certain slow-wittedness on the part of the king) for the Hebrew midwives to stand up to Pharaoh and thwart his initial plan of having them do his dirty work for him; it helped that they could easily play on his growing fear that the Hebrews might be some sort of master race by persuading him that Hebrew women (Amazon-like?) needed no help in giving birth.

Resorting to a wholesale massacre of Hebrew boys, with all the collateral damage that that would inevitably bring, was Pharaoh's final option.

How else could we have wound up with the familiar (and wonderfully cinematic) story of Pharaoh's daughter spying the baby Moses in the bulrushes and resolutely choosing to adopt the very one that God would eventually call to lead the children of Israel out of bondage?

And yet do we know how many Hebrew mothers besides Moses' mother found equally ingenious ways to shield their newborn sons from harm?

We can only speculate, but courage and dogged persistence, along with God's gracious help, surely figured in the saving of many a life.

Identifying themselves with a celebrity like Jesus—once Simon Peter had trusted the impulse to say aloud what he and the others were beginning to suspect: that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, though not exactly the messiah they had been expecting—identifying themselves as followers of Jesus of Nazareth would take every ounce of courage that Jesus' disciples could muster because eventually it would mean presenting themselves, in the words of the apostle Paul, writing to the Christians in Rome, “as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God”.

Jesus certainly knew how to put people on the spot, and that's exactly what he did to his disciples that fateful day near Caesarea Philippi —sneaking up on them with an out-of-the-blue question like: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”, then hitting them square in the face with: “But who do *you* say that I am?”

The disciples' answers to Jesus' first question were, of course, stock answers: “Some say [you're] John the Baptist, but others [say] Elijah, and still others [say] Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

These answers came easily; the disciples had indeed heard people speculate about Jesus' identity in these terms, and to a certain extent they were answers that made sense to the disciples, too.

When they said “John the Baptist”, they may not have meant that Jesus was literally a reincarnation of John the Baptist, who had already been martyred. But by announcing the coming of the Kingdom and calling on people to repent Jesus did seem to be picking up where John had left off.

Or Jesus might be the “prophet like Elijah” whose arrival was supposed to usher in the Messianic Age, or, if not the prophet like Elijah, then maybe a prophet like Jeremiah or one of the other prophets; aside from John the Baptist, it had been a long time since anyone like the great prophets of Israel had been on the scene. By posing his first question Jesus was in effect inviting the disciples to review these stock answers, answers that reflected some of their past hopes and dreams, as well as the past hopes and dreams of an entire nation, and discard them. Only then could their consciousness be stretched; only then would they be more or less ready for his second question, the question that really counted.

I say that the disciples were “more or less ready” for Jesus’ next question because of the way Peter answered it. Peter had to be the one—rough, boisterous, impulsive Peter—he had to be the one who blurted out the answer for himself and for everybody else: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” After all, Jesus was fishing for an answer, and it was up to Peter to give it everything he had. None of the other answers was sufficient, or Jesus would not have restated the question the way he did. Peter’s answer was sufficient, of course; it was the correct one. To say that Jesus was the Messiah would probably have been close enough; it would be difficult to prove that the Gospel writer added the phrase, “Son of the living God”, to Peter’s answer, but it’s possible that that’s what happened. Nonetheless, Peter’s answer was the correct one, though it is very likely that he really didn’t know what he was saying.

This is not to say that Jesus didn’t commend Peter for uttering what has come to be known as his “confession” because he did. “Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven,” is what Jesus says to Peter, though there is evidence enough to suggest that Peter did not understand the implications of his “confession”. What was “messiah” to him but a liberator, someone who would free the Jewish people from the Romans? This is the kind of leader that all the Jews hoped that God would send. No wonder Jesus ended up ordering his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah! Clearly, Peter had stumbled onto something, but Jesus did not want anyone to be misled: The kind of messiah that Jesus was to be had yet to be revealed.

Not only would the kind of messiah that Jesus was to be fail to meet everyone's expectations, including Peter's; the kind of messiah that Jesus was to be would far exceed anyone's expectations.

Jesus was indeed the Messiah, the Christ, God's Chosen One, but he had not been chosen to lead a political revolution; he had been chosen to embody a spiritual revolution.

And God's Chosen One had chosen them to help him.

It had something to do with what Jesus said next: "...you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

It would take Peter and the other disciples until well after Jesus' resurrection from the dead to begin to comprehend the full implications not only of the confession that Peter blurted out to Jesus that day: "You are the Messiah [, the Christ], the Son of the living God," but also of the challenging assignment Jesus had given them.

Jesus' searching question: "But who do *you* say that I am?" not only demanded a response from Peter and the other disciples; it demands a response from all who would call themselves Christian.

The Church that came after the disciples eventually developed Peter's initial response into what we know as "the creeds": first a baptismal covenant that came to be called "The Apostles' Creed" and then a theological statement of belief that we know as "The Nicene Creed".

A detailed response to the question: "Who do you say that Jesus is?" stands at the center of both of these creeds.

At every baptism, as members of the Church, we reaffirm our faith in Jesus, whom each one of us, along with Peter, declares to be the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of God.

And we recount the story of his life, death, and resurrection (this morning we will do this in song, as we have been doing for several Sundays now)—recount the wondrous story which proclaims that God in the person of Jesus, the Christ, "lived and died as one of us", that God in the person of Jesus, our risen Lord, is with us and among us.

In most every celebration of the Eucharist we reaffirm this faith corporately, when we say together: "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one Being with the Father."

We seem to have come a long way from Peter's simple declaration, but theological sophistication can be deceiving.

If the Church's creeds have come to represent a view of God that belongs to some bygone era, they are of little use; if they still mirror our struggle to describe the God who never tires of reaching out to us in love, then the creeds are of infinite worth.

But in a world teeming with distractions, a world in which "Christ" is often assumed to be Jesus' last name, each of us who call ourselves Christian must finally be willing to give our own answer to Jesus' question: "But who do *you* say that I am?"

And if the term "Messiah" or "the Christ" or even "God's Chosen One" can no longer adequately convey to others our trust in the boundlessness of God's investment and

involvement in the human enterprise, then we shall have to discover other images that we can use to spread the Good News.

In the final analysis, of course, it is not only what we say that will make the difference, but what we do.

Somehow the way we live must reflect more clearly what it means to be chosen by the Chosen One of God.

In his response to the chaotic events in Charlottesville, Virginia, our Presiding Bishop, the Most Rev. Michael Curry, emphasized the Church's need to foster 'God's Beloved Community' as our only way forward.

"I'm a follower of Jesus of Nazareth," writes Bishop Curry, "because I believe [that] the teachings, the Spirit, the Person, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus have shown us the way through the chaos to true community as God has intended from the beginning. Through the way of love,...Jesus has shown us the way to become the Beloved Community of God.

St. Paul said it this way: 'In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself', and now [we have been] entrusted with 'the message of reconciliation' (2 Corinthians 5:19).

"I know too well," concludes Bishop Curry, "that talk of Beloved Community, which Jesus was describing when he spoke of the kingdom of God in our midst, can be dismissed as nice but naïve, idealistic but unrealistic. I know that.

But I also know this. The way of Beloved Community is our only hope.

In this most recent unveiling of hatred, bigotry, and cruelty,...we have seen the alternative to God's Beloved Community. And that alternative is simply unthinkable.

...We who follow Jesus have made a choice to walk a different way: the way of disciplined, intentional, passionate, compassionate, mobilized, organized love intent on creating God's Beloved Community on earth."

Bishop Curry's stirring words serve to remind us of who and whose we are—and of the amount of courage and persistence that has always been required not only to maintain that precious and hard-won identity, but also, with God's help, to invite everyone we meet to imagine what it would be like to be members of God's Beloved Community and then convince them, assure them that they are already full-fledged members of that blessed community, but it is still a weighty responsibility to be entrusted with the means by which the spiritual liberation of all people can be accomplished.

It is unlikely, as I suggested earlier, that Peter and the other disciples had a clue as to how they were to go about binding and loosing things on earth beyond knowing that it had something to do with the spiritual authority that they had been given.

No doubt Peter and the other disciples had as many misgivings about their ability to wield "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" as you and I have about our ability to proclaim Jesus' way of love as the means of making God's Beloved Community on earth a reality.

It must have been a struggle for the disciples, until they were able to remember who had given them those keys and realized who would always be there with them to guide their every move.

Then they wasted no time, as apostles, getting about the business of unlocking the gates of the Kingdom for anyone they happened to meet.
Can the Church in this day and age afford to do anything less than rededicating ourselves, in the words of our Presiding Bishop, to fulfilling “God’s passionate desire and dream to [establish] the Beloved Community in the human family and [in] all of creation”?
Since the keys to the Kingdom have been passed on to us, we have a God-given opportunity to use them as faithfully as we can.
God only knows the great good we will do!