

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Proper 16 Year A
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The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson

At some point along our Christian journey, we each will need to answer the question Jesus posed to his disciples in our gospel reading this morning ~ "Who do YOU say that I am?"

A bishop asked me this question once. I still remember my first few responses. Jesus is the reason I get out of bed each morning. Jesus is the reason I have hope in my heart. Jesus is every new possibility before me. Jesus is the new creation I am to become.

I didn't define Jesus by his role in history. I didn't claim him as a good teacher, or a role model, or a prophet. I defined Jesus as that which enters my heart and changes me, moment by moment.

I pray each of you has done this, really examined who Jesus is to you, not just what you think you believe about Jesus, but who Jesus is for you, and if your answer comes around to claim the role of Jesus as Lord of all, of sovereign over our lives, I know you have been changed forever, and we are given the call and empowerment to live into this truth and incarnate it in our world.

As Peter found out, often this lightning insight comes in a flash. It may come when we're walking down the road, like Saul on his way to Damascus and knock us over. It may come in a dream or a deep state of meditation. Or like Peter, you may suddenly hear words come out of your mouth that you didn't know you were saying.

Sometimes the insight unfolds slowly and delicately within our lives. If you've ever written out your spiritual autobiography, and viewed your life through the lens of encounters with God, you may have identified major milestones when you were transformed by the presence of God in your life. Some of these moments may be dramatic events, while others subtle.

Some of these moments may have been the best moments of your life.
Some of these moments may have been the worst moments of your life.

Regardless of the situation, these transformative moments can throw us off track. We can feel helpless because God initiates these transcendent moments, not us. And they come unbidden, and not necessary when it's convenient.

We often wonder what happened or where did we disappeared to in these moments of holy distraction. Mother Betsy wrote about her recent transformative moment when celebrating the Eucharist last week in our weekly newsletter. She didn't need to have apologized for it, for when she told me about the experience, I knew immediately that you all would have recognized her pause in the Eucharistic prayer as a holy encounter, not a mistake, but I am so grateful that she witnessed and testified of it to all of you. That's the other thing we're called to do ~ witness and testify to Jesus' presence in our lives. I know, for Episcopalians that's a hard thing to do, which is why most often in my weekly reflection to you, I witness to the presence of Christ in our parish life, so our body can be influenced and strengthened by the awareness of the presence of the Spirit among us.

Now by reading our gospel story today, you may disagree with me about our charge to witness to the influence of Spirit in our lives, to the recognition of Jesus' true identity and mission, for Jesus sternly tells his disciples not to tell anyone.

For years, the only explanation I ever heard for his command to silence was that everyone knows how delicious it is to share a secret with others. Jesus must have imagined by sternly instructing people not to tell, he was in fact encouraging people to tell. This explanation always sounded a bit weak to me.

Finally in my reading for my sermon preparation, I uncovered an explanation that made much more sense to me. Jesus knew it wasn't time yet for the world to know his true identity. Jesus knew that there were a lot of misconceptions about what the messiah was at that time and that if the disciples claimed him as such, people would not comprehend the real truth.

The disciples needed to ponder a bit. To hold the truth in their hearts and let it unfold, carefully, slowly, through all the rest of the experiences of Jesus, through and beyond his death. They needed time to really know and claim the identity and mission of Christ and then to see the path forward for them.

This makes such sense to me, for we often get a glimpse of Christ, and find that we must ruminate on it before it begins to become clear. We often have a sense of calling to some ministry that we understand to be our part of Jesus' mission, but how that will unfold hasn't yet been revealed to us. We rarely get the whole package at once. And of course, as soon as we get the whole package, the package changes ~ that's what is marvelous, exciting, and really scary about being with God.

Spiritual teachers often make a distinction between realization and integration. Realization is "getting it right". We grasp, for a moment, the necessity of Jesus' death on the cross or we comprehend the meaning of grace for an instant or we connect to our grounding in eternal life. Often when we have these moments, we exclaim, "I got it."

But "getting it right" is not an ego accomplishment of which we can be proud. Nor does it mean "mission accomplished" and we can now move on to other things and leave our spiritual life alone. Rather it means we have momentarily allowed the Spirit to have influence on our hearts. But this is a beginning, not an ending. Getting it right initiates a process. A process we patiently engage while another piece of the puzzle gets connected, and then another, until we finally can integrate the parts, and see the clear path forward. Peter initiated for himself and the disciples a process of comprehension and then response.

We can tell through hearing the story that Peter surprised even himself with this lightning insight. The meaning of what he said still evades him in this part of the story. Peter got it right, and Jesus blessed him for it. However, Jesus takes this confession of Peter and develops it in startling ways. Jesus shifts the focus from himself to Peter. Peter has seen and acknowledged the identity and mission of Jesus, and now Jesus is unfolding the identity and mission of Peter. The two are intimately linked together.

From Jesus' point of view, Peter's capacity to recognize the ultimate truth of who Jesus is and what he is offering is rooted in the truth about himself. He is a human being (Simon, son of Jonah). This is the earthly dimension, the level of flesh and blood. However, this level has not given him the eyes to see the spiritual truth of Jesus. Rather it is his connection and oneness to the heavenly Father that has allowed him to receive the revelation of Jesus' special relationship to the Father. Peter has pushed into the spiritual dimension of his being. The heavenly father of Jesus who dwells within Peter has allowed Peter to acknowledge the heavenly identity and mission of Jesus.

This is what being "in heaven" is all about – this is heaven on earth – when we are in an open relationship with God and through that openness we comprehend Jesus' identity and mission and make it our own. When the inner revelation of the heavenly Father bursts forth in earthly recognition of Jesus, heaven and earth come together.

This happens for us too. When because of our prayer life and our spiritual disciplines, we sit and are quiet before God, and we draw ourselves into an open place with God, we recognize Jesus around us. We incarnate Jesus for others. We take upon ourselves Jesus' mission and identity. This is how God's kingdom spreads, for we are growing into the possibility of humankind, which Jesus opened up for us.

Betsy accurately defined the moment of her holy encounter last week during the Eucharistic prayer as a pregnant pause. God was holding her heart for a moment before giving birth within her of a new understanding of her priesthood, or a new way of comprehending the sacrament, or of a new depth of participation in divine love offered, or of a new way she will incarnate Jesus to others.

For those of you who can readily recall transcendent moments with God, this will all make sense of you. You may be able to see your life as a timeline with these God-moments as the markers along the way. You know what that vulnerable and "open to God feeling" is like and you know the kernel of truth embedded deep within your heart of your particular calling, your part of Jesus' identity and mission which is yours to claim, and you may be encouraged to hunker down into the love of God and open yourself up to more and more of these experiences.

For those of you who may be wondering what in the world I am talking about, and aren't sure you've ever had these clear moments of the presence of Christ; I invite you to come and talk with me. For I am certain you have had them; sometimes it's a matter of looking at your life through a different lens, of uncovering a new attentiveness through which to find your answer of "Who do YOU say I am?"

Each one of us will have a different answer to this question. Yet underlying them all, will be the acknowledgment that we are changed by Jesus and transformed into the human possibility Jesus spoke of – that through our relationship to God we will be bound to the identity and mission of Christ.

This is the key – both the key, which Jesus gave to Peter, and the key to our living faithful lives. Being open to bringing heaven onto earth by loving God and claiming the part of Jesus' identity and mission we have been given.

I remember sitting with Wanda at her final meeting of the Commission of Ministry, shortly before her ordination as a deacon. One of the members asked her, "Why do you need to be a deacon to do what you want to do? What difference will ordination make in your life?" She said the most amazing answer; She said "My heart will be bound to God."

In light of our story today, I would say, through her binding of her heart to God, as evidenced in her ordination vows, her heart would also be bound to her part of Christ's identity and mission she was called to claim. The difference for her would have nothing to do with the authority and power of the church, or how people would view her with a collar on. Her heart would be bound to God in a whole new way, which would release in her the claim of her ministry, which is a part of Christ's.

Wanda is remarkable and extraordinary for her capacity to articulate the truth shown forth in our gospel today.

Yet this sense of binding our hearts to God, through our prayers, so that we may claim and embrace Christ's mission as our own

is not unique to ordained ministry. It is for the “priesthood of all believers”; it is for each one of us.

This binding of our hearts to God doesn't always feel safe. I am certain it did not feel safe to the Hebrew midwives who went against a direct order of Herod to kill all baby boys. However, they had bound their hearts to God and could only choose to honor the call of God to preserve life.

This binding of our hearts to God doesn't always feel safe. And yet it is unsafe not to. Our broken world is deeply in need of heaven coming onto earth. This happens only when we are as Peter, opening the gates of heaven to flow into and through our hearts, so we may be transformed by the influence of the Spirit, and incarnate Jesus' mission and identity in our world. For the sake of God's world, may we do this today and all the days of our lives.
Amen.