

27-Aug-2017 Sermon Who are You?

Brian Lennstrom

I'd like to start with a quote from Michael Scott, the manager in the TV show "The Office." "Is there a God?" he asks. "If not, then what are all these churches for?"

So you're sitting down with Jesus, and He says, "I've got a question for you. *Who are you?*" And you answer, "Well, I'm a lot of things. I'm a husband and a father and a grandfather; and I still work full time and there are my hobbies and.... By the way, Jesus, I was wondering if you could help me bal... ance... all... my...." And you notice that Jesus's eyes are glazing over.

"Let me ask you another way," He says. "Who are you in relation to *me?*" "Oh, well, I'm an Episcopalian and a deacon and I read the Bible, and... By the way, Jesus, I was wondering if you could help me understand my son's illness in light of your good... ness...." And you notice again that Jesus's eyes are glazing over.

"Let me ask again. *Who do you say I am?*"

So that's the first insight from this passage—that our identity and our relationship is actually in Him. *In Him*. Paul says that if anyone is *in Christ*, then they are a new creation; he says that we're chosen *in Christ*; he says that we're seated *in Christ* in the heavenly places; he says we are alive to God *in Christ*; he says there is no condemnation for those who are *in Christ*; he says that *in Christ*

we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others; he says that *in Christ* all will be made alive. That we are created *in Christ*.

That's the first insight—that our identity is in Christ. Our baptismal covenant says that we that will seek and serve Christ *in all persons*, but it may be more accurate to say that we will seek and serve all persons *in Christ*. The difference is a nuance; it's a nuance but most of the important things in life are in nuance. Identity is in Christ.

The best analogy I can come up with for this is the fetus. Imagine an interview with a fetus—how it can happen, I don't know, so let's just use our imagination. "So, Mr. or Miss Fetus, what's it like inside there? Are you happy? Do you have enough room? Do you ever long to be born? Do you have any sense of who you are?" And the fetus might answer, "*You don't understand. The overwhelming reality of my life is MOTHER! She moves and I move. She sings and I listen. She sleeps and I kick. She eats tacos and my stomach feels queasy. For all intents and purposes, my identity is her.*"

And when it's born, we can hear the cry of the newborn as them saying, "*What the heck just happened? I was warm; I was nestled; I was happy, and then, all of sudden, whoosh.... And where is my mother?*"

The cry of the newborn is the cry for the mother. And that's really all that theology is, the proclamation of the Church to God and to the world, saying, "Where is our Christ? Wherever you are, come quickly!"

So the question, “Who are you?” really is the same as the question “Who do you say that I am?” which is the question Jesus asks His disciples. But, initially, they convey the wrong answer. They convey the answer of *religion*. They convey the answer of *religion*.

So we have to stop for a second and define “religion.” Webster says that religion is the belief in a god. But that’s not how I define it. And I hope you’ll put up with my definition of religion—actually I can’t claim it; I got it from someone else—because I think it’s of critical significance. It’s important because we live in a post-religious age. If we want to reach people for Christ, then we have to deal with the fact that we live in a post-religious age; that most people have no interest in attending church or becoming Christian even though their parents might have been Christians; even though Christianity once was the American way; even though this country was settled by Puritans and Pilgrims, Methodists and Baptists. And Episcopalians. Even though some people have at time thought that Christianity is the cool thing to do. Because being religious in America hasn’t been cool for decades.

And that’s a very good thing. Because religion is a distraction from Christ. Religion is *the* distraction from Christ. He doesn’t have much to do with it. For generations—for centuries—when Jesus asked people, Who are you? They answered “I’m religious.” And that’s not the right answer. It’s close, but it’s not *very* close.

So, what *is* religion? I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s easier to talk around religion rather than define it; to understand religion by way of examples than by way of sharpness. Religion can be the idea of a Christian America, that what’s good for America is good for Christ. Religion can be the

idea that—according to the Pharisees who had become believers in the book of Acts—if you wanted to become a Christian, you had to be circumcised. It drove Paul crazy. Religion can be feeling good about yourself because you're wearing your "Sunday Best," because you don't smoke, because you don't swear, because you're no an addict, because you're basically a nice, decent person. Thrifty, brave, clean and reverent.

And there's a dark side as well. We love religion in part because it gives us just a little advantage over the other person. "We saw someone casting out demons in your name," the disciples told Jesus, "but we told him to stop because he's *not one of us*." Religion is like that. In exchange for a little bit of sacrifice, for giving up your Sundays, for following the system, for obeying the Christian rules, for adopting a method, you get just a little bit of advantage. With God. And with others. And that's all we need: just a little advantage. Over others.

The disciples report three religious answers to Jesus's question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" The first is the religious answer of social justice. Let's start with the most sensitive, shall we? Don't get me wrong—working for social justice is not optional. Let us speak truth to power; John the Baptist spoke truth to power. As Reverend Rodin said last week, white supremacy is the original sin of America. So let's tear it out, bit by bit, in Charlottesville, in Anacortes, in my own heart. God has given us that mission in America, and, by God, if we don't do it, He'll find someone who will.

But it's because we serve Jesus that we *can* speak truth to power. First, if we think we're going to make lasting change, if we think we're going to storm the gates of hell using our own energy, we're sadly naïve. Second, if social justice becomes our religion, we're sure to get frustrated, infuriated, terrified, because things will not change fast enough to suit us. And that's when we

tire. Third, we serve a person—we serve Truth as a person--; we don't serve our own moral outrage. I don't know about you, but I don't trust my moral outrage much after 15 outrageous minutes. *I tire of me.*

The second answer the disciples give is the mystical religious answer. Because Elijah never died—technically, he was “translated”—the Jews had a sneaking suspicion he was still out there somewhere, and that he could return at any time. For this reason he lived in this kind of mystical no-man's land, and that's where some of us live as well, always looking for the latest devotional practice, a better system of prayer, always hoping for some sort of comfort that can't be attained any other way. How do we know if piety has become religion? It's when we drink deep of comfort and spiritual pleasures to avoid feeling the suffering of Christ.

The last is Jeremiah. He stands for the Bible people. And we're the worst! Not only do you get the “I have special knowledge” righteousness, but we also have the “If you didn't go to seven years of education after high school, what good are you?” righteousness. When the Bible people have made theology into a system, they've crossed into religion. Because theology isn't a system. It's closer to that cry of the newborn.

So what do we do, those of us mired in religion? How do we live in the post-religious world and show the attractiveness of our faith and our savior? Well, the last thing we want to do is to convert post-religious people back into religion, to say, “Look, at our church we sing Fanny Crosby hymns because we've always sung Fanny Crosby hymns and we love Fanny Crosby hymns so you better start liking them, too. Cuz at our church, that's what we sing. And there are 8,000 Fanny Crosby hymns.”

How do we put all this into practice? Do we have to give up our Social Justice, our devotional life, our Bible, our Fanny Crosby? That's like asking the question, can a person be happily married and still love golf? Of course, the answer is Yes. And no.

Let's listen in on a conversation between a husband and a wife. "You know, honey," says the wife (although in this story the genders—and even golf, as the subject—is irrelevant—it could be about any activity or hobby), "You know, honey, when we got married 45 years ago, I envisioned our life together a little differently than it has turned out. Namely, more time doing things together and less time you doing *golf*. So here's what I suggest: I'd like you to turn *up* the importance, and turn *up* the urgency with regards to *me*, and turn *down* the importance, and turn *down* the urgency with regards to *golf*." Now here's the thing about this conversation—she can have this conversation with him whether he plays golf five times a week or five times a year. What's important is not whether we read the Bible or pray or do social justice five times a week as opposed to five times a year; it's about our passion, our sense of what's important, our urgency, our sense of our own *mission* and *purpose*. What's important is our identity and our relationship. What's important is the answer to the question, "Who *are* you?"

That's the hard conversation. But following the hard conversation is the beautiful conversation, where the husband says, "Okay, I get it. So if I spend less time golfing, and less time watching golf on television, and if I get rid of some of the golfing-related knick-knacks I have around the house, what then? What do we do together then?" And that's the beautiful conversation, that Jesus is having with us, the question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" and does our passion reflect our answer to that question. Are we willing to turn up the importance and turn up the urgency? Are we willing to crack through religion?

So, this is crème brulee. It's one of the most delicious desserts of all time and if you haven't tried it, I suggest you find a nearby restaurant that serves it, and order it. No need to get dinner, just the crème brulee. It's got two layers: the bottom layer is kind of a custardy thing, and the top layer is a hardened, caramelized layer. You make it by putting in the custard part, and add brown sugar to the top and then to caramelize the top and make it hard, you use a little blow torch on it. That's why it's the favorite dessert to make, by ten year-old boys.

I know what you're thinking—is he *really* going to eat that crème brulee in front of us? There certainly isn't enough for everyone to have some. But maybe, just *maybe*, he's going to have someone come up and eat it.

Crème brulee is an excellent representation of religion. Because you have to crack through it. You see, just as it is right now, it's beautiful. A beautiful brown color. And there is beauty in religion, isn't there? John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah—these are all beautiful people. They're not far from Jesus. They just *aren't* Jesus. They aren't the right answers to the question, "Who are you?"

It's beautiful to the eyes, and when I smell it, I smell caramelized sugar and vanilla, and it's heavenly. And when I taste it, I taste sugar and milk and... Well, so much for the idea of having someone come up and share it, huh?

But the point with crème brulee, and the point with religion, is that you've got to crack through the crust to get to the really good stuff. The sight and the smell and the taste off the top are

nothing compared to the taste of the stuff underneath. But in the post-religious age, it's time we turned up the importance; it's time we turned up the urgency and it's time that we left distractions behind. Even the distraction of religion.

So on to the exciting conclusion. Simon, who represents us, answers the question correctly. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God," he says. He answers the question about Jesus correctly and therefore he answers the question of his own identity correctly and his own relationship correctly. And this not through religion, but through revelation. "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." Revelation dispels religion. Revelation resolves the Yes and No of our religion.

And watch what happens next. Jesus changes Simon's identity. And because He's speaking to us, He changes our identity as well. "And I tell you, you are Peter...." As soon as Simon gets the answer of his identity correct, because he knows that his identity is in Christ, Christ changes his identity. Despite Peter's weakness. Despite Peter's tendency to be a loudmouth. Despite his eventual betrayal. Jesus is the one who says, "Behold, I am making all things new." He makes our business *His* business.

And then watch what happens. "And on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." Not only does Jesus make our identity new; He propels His kingdom forward through us. He cracks through religion and reaches through us to the world so much in need of His healing.