

Who Am I?
Mark 8:27-38
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, September 13, 2009

“Who am I? one of the essential questions in search of the definitive answer. You can’t mature emotionally and spiritually without a healthy dose of self-knowledge to ground you in your humanity.

Four hundred years before Christ, the Greek philosopher Plato taught his disciples “The unexamined life is not worth living.” A generation earlier Plato’s mentor Socrates taught his disciples “Know thyself.” Apparently Socrates and Plato were both saddened by and frustrated with shallow people whose lives became insipid and monotonous because they never really discovered themselves. “Don’t let this happen to you!” Socrates and Plato warned their students, “Examine your life and know yourself!”

Certainly the process of self-revelation must be on every Christian’s to do list. When Christ calls you to discipleship you’re invited to go on a dual journey: the outward journey connecting you with people, places and things, but also the inward journey going deep into yourself because after all, “the unexamined life is not worth living.”

How effective could you be for Christ and his gospel if you never confronted yourself warts and all? If you only celebrate your strengths but never come to terms with your weaknesses how will you ever become comfortable in your own skin? By never intentionally discovering and claiming your strengths, your personal talents and spiritual gifts, what missed opportunities to serve Christ and your neighbor will you someday have to answer for?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and active member of the resistance in Nazi Germany, was jailed and later martyred for his role in the July 20 plot to assassinate Hitler. His confinement forced him to look even deeper into himself, but instead of finding comfort and affirmation, he only uncovered more questions. After his death, his friends discovered in his prison diaries a poem entitled, “Who Am I?”

*Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell’s confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a squire from his country-house.
Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders
Freely and friendly and clearly,
As though it were mine to command.
Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
Equally, smilingly, proudly,*

Like one accustomed to win.

*Am I then really all that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
Yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
Thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
Tossing in expectation of great events
Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?*

*Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
And before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am Thine!*

Be forewarned, the inward journey of prayerful introspection is not always affirming and orienting. Sometimes, like Bonheoffer, you're left confused and wanting. But also like Bonheoffer you can find comfort in the firm knowledge, "Whoever I am, You know, O God, I belong to you!"

Right there, in Bonheoffer's final verse, you can grasp the essence of self-knowledge by understanding you can never completely know yourself apart from God. At the very last, by grace alone, any self-knowledge must be grounded in your identity as a child of God. For this reason alone to know yourself, you must first know Christ.

"Who do the people say that I am?" Jesus asked his disciples midway through Mark. And I point out Jesus' question is asked in the eighth of sixteen chapters because this passage is the hinge of Mark's gospel. Up to this point Jesus' ministry was like a well run political campaign. Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. His preaching, teaching and healing were all about proclaiming the coming of God's Kingdom, but now there would be a calculated strategic shift. He now revealed himself to be the Messiah, literally the Anointed One, sent by God to suffer and die for the sins of the world.

"Who do the people say that I am?" was followed up by the more personal question, "But who do you say that I am?" In other words "Who am I?" Don't be fooled. Jesus wasn't having an identity crisis. He knew full well who he was and who he belonged to but he also knew Peter and the others would never completely know themselves without intimately knowing Christ.

Last Sunday's sermon topic was selective listening. We hear, but we don't always listen. We cover our ears when conversations get dicey and pretend we heard something else entirely.

This is exactly what happened in this conversation between Jesus and his disciples, with Peter being their spokesman. When Jesus confirmed Peter's declaration they had to be elated, not only because the Messiah finally appeared during their lifetime, but especially because they were his inner circle. Like aides and advisors working on a winning presidential campaign who daydream about cabinet appointments and other powerful positions, the disciples had to be anticipating their influential roles in Christ's new administration.

But Jesus wanted more than that from them. He wasn't offering them an apartment in his palace along with power, status and wealth. Instead he shocked them back into reality.

"Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the chief priests and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly." (Mark 8:31-32)

Peter, speaking for the others, didn't want any part of this suffering and death talk. Equally adamant Jesus wanted them to willingly follow him to the cross, certainly the place for salvation, but also the place for truth telling and self-knowledge. How else can you really know yourself unless you first deny yourself, take up your cross and follow Jesus?

Socrates warns us the unexamined life isn't worth living and then Plato encourages us to do something about it, "Know yourself!" But if Plato and Socrates tell us what to do, Jesus shows us how to do it: knowing yourself only comes through self-denial, sacrificial living for others, and following Christ wherever he takes you. Self-knowledge leads to salvation when you concede you can't fully know yourself until you fully know Jesus, and by "fully know Jesus" I mean this: you know Christ on his terms and not your own. You accept the God we have instead of waiting for the God you want.

At Caesarea Philippi, and immediately afterward, by watching Peter and the other disciples' behavior, you get the sense they were pretty full of themselves and confident they had sufficient self-knowledge to rule the world with Jesus. Why else would Peter question Jesus' decision to die in Jerusalem? Obviously Peter thought he knew better. Why else would the disciples argue with each other, "Who is the greatest?"

They thought they knew themselves, they thought they knew better than Jesus, but on Good Friday their masks were torn from off their faces and their self-deception was exposed. The scales on their eyes couldn't fall off, they had to be ripped off before they could honestly see and know themselves. Only then could they embrace Christ and his truth that set them free.

Question: how well do you know yourself? Have you accepted the invitation to take the inward journey to self-knowledge?

Another question: how well do you know Christ, who said, “I am the way, the truth and the life?”

God invites you to know yourself through discipleship. Self-denial, servanthood and following Jesus wherever he takes you is the only way to self-knowledge and the truly significant life.

Plato was correct, the unexamined life is a wasted life. Jesus is equally correct, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and my gospel, will save it.”

Learn to know yourself by knowing Jesus and then learn the secret of the examined life: self-knowledge allows self-sacrifice and self-sacrifice makes love possible.

Get to know Christ who died to set you free so you can fully know yourself.