
So, Who Are You, Anyway?

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
Advent 3 – Year B**

Unedited transcript:

Who are you? This is the question that the priest and the Levites from Jerusalem pose to John the Baptist. Who are you? Now, there was a time in my life where my standard greeting was, "How are you?" But for some reason, no matter how hard I tried to enunciate this greeting, it was often heard by people as, "Who are you?" I would walk into the elevator, "How are you?" "Who am I?" I would walk into a new office, "How are you?" The response, "Who am I?" Of all of the times that I was misheard, I cannot think of one where anyone was happy about what they thought they heard. Now, I'm a little slow, but I pick up over time. So I gradually changed my greeting to hello. And I'm happy to report that has been universally accepted.

Who are you? When somebody else poses that question to you, your natural defense is to be defensive, as if to say, "Who are you to challenge me?" So it's interesting to me, then, that John the Baptist, upon being challenged as to his authority, his identity, answers in such a humble way. Really not what I would have expected from John the Baptist, this character who's been out in the wilderness baptizing folks, stirring up what amounts to a revolution, out by the River Jordan, where the bandits often hide, the portion of the river in the wilderness where insurgents come across when planning an attack.

Humility was not what I expected from John the Baptist. He starts off answering this question the way we often do by telling us who he is not. "I am not the Messiah. I am not Elijah. I am not the prophet. I am not all of these other wonderful people that you might think I am." We do that too, don't we, when answering this question, who are you. We often say, "Well, I am not just a lawyer. I am not just a teacher. I am not just a parent. I am not just a child. I am that, but I am more than that." Many of us have spent time, for example, studying our personality, whether through Myers-Briggs or the Enneagram or something other system. And it's a good thing. We learned a lot about who we are, as we behave. And we often learn a lot about how we're trying to be somebody we're not.

But at the end of the day, what we're learning about are still masks, or characters, or roles that we play. And the deeper question, who are you, is still not answered because we are more than our personality. Our faith is that we truly are a gift of God, that there is some part of our nature which is given, which is born. It is not created or made. And so the question, who are you, has deep, deep resonance for us. And we spend much of our life trying to answer that very question.

And John might be a model for us there, because not only does he go through who he is not, but he does have a sense of who he is. At the end of this litany of questions, all of these negations that John the Baptist offers to those scribes and lawyers from Jerusalem, he says an affirmative claim. "I am the voice crying in the wilderness to make straight the ways of the Lord. That's who I am. There is a part of me which is the voice crying in the wilderness, apart from the masks, or roles, or characters that you might see." And then he recognizes Jesus. "There is another," he said.

And later, not in our reading today, he says, "I must decrease and he must increase." An amazing self-awareness, an amazing humility, to point to Jesus and to follow him. Not to see him as a competitor, even inside their family relationships, not to see him as simply a rival, but to notice, to be aware, and to follow Jesus. Even when he doesn't completely understand. You remember the rest of the story, of course. There's another time where John says, "Now, wait a minute. You said you were the one, but I see you doing all these things

inconsistent with being the one. So like what's going on?" And Jesus says, "Come and see. Are the sick not being healed? Are people, if you will, not being restored to the community?" Giving us all a sense of what Christ's mission and ushering in the kingdom of heaven really is.

Who are you? Well, in John's humility, he manages, I think, to be open to the presence of Jesus and to notice the presence of the Christ in Jesus. But what did he see? I think Jesus is actually different from the other prophets. In the line of their succession, perhaps, but different. So much of their spirituality is about storing up the energy that they will need to ascend to heaven. Think of Elijah ending with the chariot going up into heaven. It was about purity and it was about storing up that energy. And John seems to be in this vein, decrying the sinfulness of others, calling people back to a new way. It ultimately cost him his life as he challenges the king as to the king's marriage, and is beheaded in response.

But Jesus, Jesus seems to offer a different way. Jesus doesn't seem to be storing up his energy. He seems to be giving it all away. There is some sense, I think, that if you define yourself by what you are not, you ultimately get lured into believing that whatever you are, you're going to have to prove that the others are less. You're only going to be more if you can prove they are less. You can only be raised up if you hold them down.

But that's not what Jesus does. Jesus, instead, gives himself away in radical abundance, doesn't he? He is, if you think about it, humbling himself simply by being here, being the divine presence, taking on the life of a human being, a small child. It is if he forgets himself from this point forward, thinking of others, acting in others, leading others to God, and not thinking about himself, feeding the 5,000, healing those who were blind, raising people back to life, all the way until the end. When they're in Gethsemane, he says, "Not my will but your will be done. And into your hands, o God, I commend my spirit."

It is if the spirituality that Jesus is offering us is one that calls us to forget ourselves on purpose, if you will. And it's hard to understand how this works, frankly. But I can give you a story that I think depicts it. It's *The Gift of the Magi*, by O. Henry. Many of you know that story, but it is worth reading again and again and again. We have a young couple, James and Della. They are poor. Christmas is coming and they have no money even to offer presents to each other. In fact, they have no material things of any real consequence, except that James has his grandfather's gold watch, and Della has this stunning auburn hair, which falls all the way to her waist.

So without talking to each other, as Christmas approaches, James goes out and pawns his watch in order to get silver combs for Della's hair. And Della goes out and has her hair cut and sells it in order to buy a gold watch chain for James. As Christmas Eve approaches, they come full of joy and expectation at not the sacrifice they have made but the gift they are giving. And as they present their gifts to each other, they are stunned to find out how useless they are. The watch chain is nothing without the watch. The silver combs are nothing without the gorgeous, stunning, auburn hair. It's been a waste, it seems. A tragic mistake.

And yet, what we see in that story, what we feel when we hear it, what O. Henry is trying to say is that, no, the greatest gift was given. The greatest gift was love. And in giving this gift of love, they literally forgot themselves. They forgot about their prized possession because they were consumed by their love for the other. And what we are left at the end of the story is the best Christmas possible. The watch is gone and the watch chain is useless, and the hair is gone, at least for the moment, and the silver combs are not going to be of any value for a long time. But their love is there, manifest in their actions and their sacrifice. They have forgotten themselves in their love for each other. And in doing so, have given each other the greatest gift that they could have possibly given.

And so it seems Jesus has done that for us, given us the greatest gift that he could possibly have given, an opening for us, a pathway to God, reminding us that God is always present. Our task, our advent task, if you will, is simply to be open to that, to find ways to forget ourselves. Now, you may have had more pedestrian experiences of this, a moment when you're in the woods, or with a friend, or around a dinner table, when everything just seems to be right, when everything just seems to be connected. There's that moment and you are transported by it. And then invariably, at least, for me, I remember that it's me that's in it. It's me that's happy. It's me enjoying this gift and privilege. And that's when it ends. When I have returned to my own sense of consciousness, there's a quality to the connectedness that is lost. Worry not, we will find it again once we know what it looks like and feels like.

But if this is what John saw in Jesus, if this is how John knew that Jesus would be different, if this is how John knew that Jesus was the Messiah, even if he didn't fully understand what the Messiah meant, it's a great gift to us. The voice crying in the wilderness to make straight the paths of God is following what he didn't fully understand. He can experience it. He knows it through his existential experiences. But he doesn't fully understand it, as the story later reveals.

And so our faith is the same. We are called during this period of advent to be watchful and aware, to get ready, to draw near to the mystery of Christmas. And what we are drawing near to is the humility of Jesus Christ, the humbling of the divine to take the form of a human, which anticipates the character of God and the path to God where we, too, might become divine.

I want to leave you with an old but wonderful story of what it might be like to forget ourselves on purpose. It's the story of Oseola McCarty. Ola, as she was known, was born in a little town in rural Mississippi. She had to quit school in the sixth grade and go to work. She worked as a laundress, as a washerwoman. She never married and she never had any children. Rick Bragg, one of my favorite authors, wrote about her in a Pulitzer prize-winning story. And what he said is she took in bundles of dirty clothes and made them clean. And she made them neat for parties that other people were attending, for weddings to which she was never invited, for graduations that she never saw. She worked hard and spent only a little and she saved the money that she needed. And then one day, Bragg also describes what a faithful Christian she was, describing her tattered Bible, which he said was held together with scotch tape to keep the Corinthians from falling out.

One day, Ola decided that she had enough money and she didn't really need to buy the air conditioner that she had been wanting. She was 80 years old. And so she started giving what she didn't need away. And when she was 87, she gave some small gifts to folks. She gave some to the church, some to her relatives, and another gift to the University of Southern Mississippi, which was located near her home in Hattiesburg. Her gift, which is now known as The Gift, was \$150,000. Local businesses matched it and others offered their part as well. The university is now granting scholarships out of a fund in Ola's name that now exceeds \$300,000.

Ola gave away her life's savings to move a world to the vision of what it ought to be, to her vision of what it ought to be. She never had a chance for an education and she wanted others to have the chance she never had. She forgot herself, if you will, on purpose. And in doing so, loved others that she never saw. "I am not the Messiah," John the Baptist says. "Well, who are you then?"

Well, first you got to know who you're not. And then you got to find that inner voice and then follow Jesus' example of forgetting yourself on purpose. And you will find, as you grow in your talent and ability to do that, that you are suddenly connected people in more intimate ways than you ever thought before. And you will draw near to the mystery of Christmas, to that humility which God offers to us when Christ appears in the form of a baby in the manger. Amen.