

Getting In The Way (Luke 9:18-27)

“Who do you say that I am?”

In our scripture passage from Luke, Peter and the disciples had heard all the popular options put forward by others to answer Jesus' question: John the Baptist, some said, or Elijah, or one or another of the old prophets.

Peter's forthright reply, however, “You are the Christ of God,” bespeaks a personal knowledge that would be unavailable to mere pollsters. Peter (and through Peter, we the readers) know this man, Jesus. We may not claim to fully comprehend him or his mission, but we can be sure that he is not yesterday's leftovers, some reanimated prophet back from the dead ready to go another round. Whatever he is and whatever he intends, Jesus is something new.

“Who do you say that I am?” Across the ages, Jesus' question has leapt from the pages of the Gospels demanding to be answered. And again and again, the answers have come. The first to respond, of course, was the very community out of which arose the writer/editors of the Synoptic tradition who reported the exchange between Jesus and Peter in the first place. Caught between synagogue and a larger, freewheeling Greco-Roman religious world, they walked a fine line between the old and the new. Their affirmation of Jesus as the Christ, or anointed one, located Jesus squarely in the tradition of their own Jewish faith and messianic expectations, although their insistence that his role and agenda transcended that of the ancient prophets even then pointed outward to a wider significance of Jesus for the entire world.

“Who do you say that I am?” In the years that followed, those who sought to answer Jesus' question addressed an ever evolving set of concerns. Church councils were convened in the wake of the watershed event that was Constantine's conversion to wrestle with questions of high Christology and proclaim what they believed to be Jesus' rightful, exalted place in the cosmic order, of the very substance of and with God the Father.

There followed a long and tragic period in the West in which the Roman papacy's answer to Jesus' question went no deeper than a cynical mouthing of Jesus' words to Peter in Mark's retelling of the story: “you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven”. This proof text was wielded like a club to build and preserve across a millennium the power and wealth of Christendom.

But behind the façade of orthodox consensus, there were always others with deeper and more various answers. In their pursuit of philosophical truth, the scholastics found in Jesus an Aristotelian First Cause. To the Christian mystics, Jesus was an intimate friend or lover. To the Reformers, Jesus was a grace-filled liberator from the deadening power of both sin and Rome.

American Christianity owes much to Pietism, one of the many streams of renewal arising from the Reformation. The Pietists, and we their spiritual descendants, keenly appreciate the personal aspect of Jesus' question, “Who do you say that I am?” The emphasis shifted subtly to what we, the respondents, have experienced of Jesus and who he is from moment to moment in our lives. On the whole, I think this development was a sign of the growing maturity of our tradition and indicative of the democratizing effects of literacy and access to texts which had previously been locked away from us. Human beings created in the image of God need the freedom to answer Jesus for themselves. Without it, we are thralls,

frozen in place. With it, however, we become collaborators with the divine, and we open ourselves up to growth and the possibility of new life both personally and corporately.

I wonder how many ways you have answered the question “Who do you say that I am?” Has Jesus ever been your guide at a time when you were lost? When you were lonely and without a friend, has Jesus comforted you? Has Jesus been your teacher? Has he healed you bodily or emotionally? If you have ever, God forbid, gone to such a place of great personal suffering that your spirit preceded your body to the grave, then was Jesus the one that you see in hindsight who called you forth back into life? Is Jesus your master? Is Jesus your savior?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, then know this: you have done more than simply answer a question. You have entered a conversation. Conversations involve both speaking and listening. And you should be prepared in this, a conversation with the holy, not just to rehash the past. For all of us, it is time to listen to God and to speak of something new.

COM: Living In The Center, But Looking To The Margins

Two months ago Ken preached a sermon entitled “In The Shadow Of A Steeple: Is It Time For A Post-American Church?”. Ken posed the question that night of whether we ought more clearly delineate our loyalties and, for the sake of our allegiance to Jesus, renounce and repent our allegiance to our nation. This is exactly the kind of conversation I mean when I say it may be time to speak of something new. For new is precisely what something like this would be.

It’s helpful, I think, to look in the mirror to get a clear picture of who we are individually and as a church. Individually, of course, there’s just too much diversity here for me to say anything accurate or helpful. Together as a church, however, I think it’s clear that we’re mostly white, mostly hetero-, and mostly middle-class folk who’ve taken good advantage of the educational opportunities we’ve had. We mostly work white-collar jobs, many of which are directly related to the betterment of our community.

Politically, we’re liberals. We find our home not so much in any political party, however, as in a challenging vision of the beloved community as articulated by King in the mid-60’s. King was realistic about the corrupting power of money, violence, race-hatred, and fear, but he also held out hope that our civic and religious institutions contain within them wisdom and resources adequate to address our problems if (and it’s a big if) we have the moral strength to lay hold of that which we were bequeathed by previous generations.

King was a reformer, or at least he was until that period near the end of his life when perhaps he changed and became something more. But the King of the early to mid-60’s, the one we venerate, the one whose heirs we continue as today in America, waged nonviolent battle to draw this fractured nation together. But lest we take comfort or congratulate ourselves too heartily on any imagined resemblances to our hero, we also need to honestly reflect on a key difference between us. King and the thousands who walked the path with him were bloodied and bruised—literally—while we, largely, are not.

Now if you’re anticipating that my next rhetorical step will be to extol the courage of the Civil Rights campaigners and lament our lack of the same, I’m afraid that I may disappoint you. My feeling is that although those saints who made the bitter journey through Montgomery, Birmingham, Selma and beyond have earned every word of praise we can give them, we might, had we been in their shoes, have walked the very same road. For were we to travel to that past, to somehow exchange our white skin for black, to leave our college degrees behind here to pick up a cotton sack there, and to greet uncountable indignities each day and unimaginable terrors each night, then we would also have the experience, likely for the first time in our lives, of living with our backs to the wall. Whereas now motivations for our activism are deeply grounded in empathy, compassion, and idealism, we would then also feel the cruel spurs of

desperation and self-preservation and we would know what it's like to make an existential commitment to hope beyond despair. Those additional dimensions, I would argue, were what catalyzed that reaction in the pews of the black church in the 60's, transmuting everyday people into saints. It's a catalyst that we as yet still await.

If we would understand it better, though, we need not merely look to the past, but only to the margins in our present day. In the fight for climate justice and against fossil fuels, for example, there are front line communities who daily experience that very same desperation and need for self-preservation. You'll find them in Appalachian counties ground under the heel of coal companies, devastated by mountaintop removal and its accompanying water pollution and high cancer rates. They're in the countless communities across the nation which have sprouted a rash of natural gas wells fracked with unknown toxic chemicals, whose supplies of often scarce fresh water are sold cheap to the well drillers and which are then under threat from contamination.

You'll find them along pipeline routes where aggressive and underhanded legal ploys are used to enforce landowner acquiescence in burying leak-prone pipe. At the beginning of the routes you'll find widespread devastation such as is seen at the Athabaskan tar sands area of Alberta. At the other end on the US Gulf Coast you'll find refineries and export terminals exposing economically depressed communities like the Manchester neighborhood of Houston to a witches' brew of cancer causing chemicals. Manchester is one of the most polluted neighborhoods in our country and the fight over the Keystone XL pipeline is for them anything but symbolic or abstract.

I mention these places and people only as examples. You will already have thought of many others with which you have firsthand experience: communities in Colombia and Palestine wracked by violence; communities in Haiti careening between one human influenced disaster to the next; immigrant communities here in western North Carolina living under constant fear of harassment and deportation; homeless men, women, and children struggling to survive in a country which virtually criminalizes poverty; LGBTQ folks who battle for basic respect, safety, and human rights; the never ending tide of the insufficiently rich and white swept repeatedly in and out of incarceration; the list goes on. Indeed, the list we could make arising from the commitments of just the people here in this one church is staggering.

But we ourselves, even though we do our best to fulfill the gospel mandate to look to the margins, still largely live (and occasionally even live large) in the center.

Welcome To The Front Lines, Soldier

That identity will be changing, however. Let me tell you how. I usually don't think of myself as a Marxist, but I will agree with the Marxists that capitalism contains within itself so many weaknesses and contradictions that even without a determined push from below, the entire structure is preordained to collapse. Right now that sound you hear is a skyscraper of greed and hubris in free fall just like the Twin Towers were on 9/11. This thing is coming apart.

Nowhere is that more evident than in the indiscriminate upheaval portended by anthropogenic climate change. In the last decade, even as the international community of scientists has vetted and verified earlier alarming predictions by some of its number about the speed at which carbon and methane loading of the atmosphere will tip the planet into a hot, new normal, it has been "fool speed" ahead for the fossil fuel industry. What were thought to be the worst case scenarios for change just five years ago are rapidly being reinterpreted as the hand we may get dealt only if we're extremely lucky. The new worst case scenarios are beyond imagining simply because in them the chance of survival for our species is nil.

We, just like everyone else on the planet, sit at Ground Zero when it comes to climate change. But I'd encourage you not to focus too much on the lurid, Hollywood-style disasters which may await us. It's the relatively smaller scale effects in the near term that will matter much more. Already climate change induced drought and flooding have caused spikes in food prices leading to political instability including in most of the countries of the Arab Spring a few years ago and in Syria now. Water remains a pressing issue for millions and climate refugees are on the move either to secure an adequate supply or simply to flee rising sea levels which will inexorably inundate their homes.

As the planet heats up both literally and figuratively, we are increasingly caught up as collateral damage as the authors of this bedlam struggle to retain a grip on the mess they've made. The fallout reaches us here even in sheltered communities like Asheville, NC in forms as various as the ham handed, ALEC-driven austerity measures rammed through our state legislature to the even more sinister attacks on our civil liberties as represented by the Big Brother NSA domestic spying program being unveiled by Edward Snowden.

The upshot is this: we who have fed the hungry may be hungry. We who have pled for the poor may be poor. We who have healed the sick, visited the prisoner, and given shelter to the homeless may find ourselves beset by the same tragedies that we once sought to shield others from. The once formidable wall separating us from them is coming down. The new wall that may come to define our lives is the one we find our backs against. In an era which biologists are now characterizing as the 6th great mass extinction event in history, few species are declining as rapidly as the once invulnerable American middle-class.

WWWD?

How will we of Circle Of Mercy change as change overtakes us? The buffeting is sure to come and we who have sung that we will not be moved most certainly *will* be moved, often, and maybe even violently. Will this be all, or will there be more to our story? In that ongoing conversation I spoke of, when we answer again individually and corporately Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?", will we repeat words and live lives which in the past stretched and molded us into new people, but which in the present may have become rote, overly familiar, and inadequate?

I think now of Martin Luther King, Jr. Not the mild and wise patron saint of racial harmony annually referenced in passing each January on the nightly news, nor even the actual King, the dangerous one, the one we know whose relevance to America has only increased each year since he first brought the prophet's thirst for justice and Christ's forgiving love to bear on the dark heart of American violence.

No, the one I'm thinking of is the King who went to Memphis. Where was he going after that? He left us some clues including a report in late 1967 entitled 'The Crisis In America's Cities' in which he called for nonviolence to be used not just as a way to humanize plaintiffs in the act of publicizing demands, but as a mass exercise of direct power to pull entire cities to a dead stop. King's assassination meant that those plans were never to be enacted, nor would anyone arise subsequently of King's stature to continue to lead a public conversation about the tactics and the strategy, the means and the ends of nonviolence. If he had lived, where would King himself have taken it? We are left to wonder.

Or better yet, we are left to answer. The trend line of King's life is clear: from the inspiring young leader of the Montgomery Improvement Association, to the gifted orator invoking the best of biblical religion and American civic tradition upon the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, to the bone weary organizer grappling simultaneously with militarism abroad and baked-in economic injustice at home, to the tragic end at the Lorraine Hotel of his dream for a more militant and ambitious nonviolent coalition, the reformer was being drawn step by step toward revolution.

Most of us know this history. I wonder why so few of us, then, have been willing to name ourselves revolutionaries, in aspiration at least if not yet in fact. This is a question with which I've been wrestling in the last year. Part of my own hesitation, certainly, is modesty. I know that I, with my taste for Pop Tarts and for sleeping in whenever possible, am no revolutionary. I met real revolutionaries in 1986 in Nicaragua who, having once torn paving stones from the streets with their bare hands to form barricades and overthrow a tyrant, then risked everything they had on a dream of learning to read, feeding their children, and singing their love and devotion for a new Nicaragua even then under a mercenary assault by a petulant, imperial America bent on its humiliation.

Measured against such a template as this, of course we are lacking. A friend of mine in Louisville once lamented our generational cohort as being the Spaghetios Generation. We, who were raised during a time which was, for some in this country anyway, a period of wealth and abundance with no historical precedent, now find that our freedom from want came with a hidden cost attached by the owners, marketers, and gatekeepers of the American Dream. The price we paid was simple: a paralyzing fear we carry within ourselves that if our loyalties and ambitions were ever to stray too far from careers, consumerism, and a narrow focus upon the security of our immediate families, then we would not only lose hold of our material goods, but even our self-respect as valued members of the community. It's little wonder, then, that heretofore America has had such scant need of the heavy handed security forces so evident in countries like China or the former Soviet Union. What would be the point? For the most part, we have always policed and repressed ourselves. We have answered Jesus' question in verse 25 where he asks, "For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world if he loses or forfeits himself?" The answer is nothing.

Yet now we are in the process of losing that world of affluence, security, and entitlement which once seemed our very birthright. In recompense, do we at least have the chance to gain back the souls we once sold cheap for a mess of pottage? I would like to think that we do have that chance. Think of it this way: we can experience in a new way God's grace to the gentiles. Whereas Paul and the apostles wrestled with the question of how and if the gentiles, come late to God's covenant, might participate in God's blessing promised to Israel, we who are come late to the revolutionary struggle for food, peace, dignity, and self-determination can perhaps hope to claim God's blessing and presence among us as, for example, those did who stood courageously in Egypt's Tahrir Square.

Could we do that? Around the world, millions of people have now had the sense to recognize when their own backs were against a wall and to say, "No more." Can we do that? The consensus of the scientific community is that we have run through and exhausted the amount of carbon which we may safely discharge into the atmosphere. The consensus of the coal, oil, and natural gas companies, however, is that not only will they drill, dig, and sell the 750 gigatons of carbon in their identified reserves, but they will find as much of the remaining estimated 2000 gigatons of buried carbon fuels as they can and burn that, too. Can we understand and acknowledge that powers and principalities such as these will brook no efforts to reform and rein them in? They will do precisely that which they have said they will do unless they themselves are broken.

This, in a nutshell, is where we find ourselves: our world teeters upon a thin edge of environmental and economic disaster. Our backs are against a wall and we can no longer ignore the peril to this and future generations. Our opponents are not prepared to negotiate with us. Secure in their power and wealth, they see no need. They will tell you, and even some who struggle against them will tell you, that their power over this world is essentially absolute.

But don't believe them. These are lies, and even worse, they are blasphemies. To say that Exxon, or corrupt politicians, or sexist oppression, or arms manufacturers, or religious intolerance, or financial institutions who defraud the unwary—to say that any of these in the end must have their way is to

blaspheme the God who became weak and underwent a sacrificial death in order to deliver us from evil. And here is the key idea of this sermon and what I hope you might take away from it: this sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross was not merely a gruesome sleight of hand to mask what otherwise would be an arbitrary setting aside of some cosmic ledger of guilt and punishment. That point of view has always been common in the church, but it's magical thinking that divorces Christ's death from any real world significance. It's ironic, really. In their effort to unequivocally affirm the central importance of the cross, interpreters who subscribe to this idea rob the cross of its power.

For the power of the cross is that it is meant to be used and not merely praised. It is the divine assertion that pre-meditated and disciplined nonviolent confrontation with evil is an asymmetrical escalation of conflict to which the powers of sin and death ultimately have no answer. The power of the cross is that it is meant to be used within history, again and again. It is the very essence of what it means to take the initiative.

Jesus took the initiative, one man alone. Years before the tribulations of Holy Week, Jesus ate with sinners, touched lepers, denounced hypocrisy, pronounced woe upon the rich—in short, he sought to turn his world upside down. He didn't content himself with the role of the gadfly, either. When the time was ripe, he set his face toward Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish elite's collusion with the Roman oppressors as well as the symbolic prize of the Zealot opposition. They each sought in their own ways concessions and validation from him, but using silence more than words, Jesus rebuked them all and held fast even through torture and death.

The significance of Jesus' death on the cross, I think, is not found at the end of his journey with just the torture and death of a single, heroic man. The significance was that no one need take the journey alone. In his teaching Jesus often used the rhetorical technique of arguing from the lesser to the greater. So if the life and death of one faithful man two thousand years ago could prompt such a flowering of religious and humanitarian insight such that saints both celebrated and unknown have drawn upon his example ever since, then how much more power could be unleashed were we, together this time, to walk the same road today.

Brothers and sisters, we have to get in the Way. We have to get in the way of the insatiable greed machine that is killing us and our planet, and to do it, we have to get in the Way of Jesus of Nazareth. You know that the first Christians were called the people of the Way (Acts 9:2). If we're going to get in the way, then we're going to have to be like Jesus: intentional, loving, direct, and unwilling to be cowed. We have to say aloud what it is that we want, but not hide it behind theological fuzziness or generalities. Here are some examples of some things we might say:

- I want to rid this earth of the scourge of fossil fuel companies.
- I want to break up the big banks and end their continual game of Russian roulette with people's lives and savings.
- I want to put an end to the manufacture of arms for war.
- I want to stop the cynical use of food and medicines as commodities traded for the enrichment of a few.
- I want to build a different kind of world where I can live unafraid of others and others can live unafraid of me.

If you can say any of those things, then perhaps you can also picture the circumstances under which they might come true: not just a revolution of values, but an actual, honest-to-God revolution, one where power changes hands, the mighty are brought low, and the lowly are lifted up.

Real revolutions like this don't just happen. They require revolutionaries. But take comfort. Around the world, such folks are already on the scene, working hard, sacrificing, sometimes even dying. They are in the Middle East, in Latin America, in Africa, in the island nations of the Pacific; they are everywhere and they are here, too. It is our responsibility both as followers of Jesus and as fellow human beings with our backs also against the wall to join them. The power of the cross lies in the power of taking it up together.

I want to leave you with what for me has been a powerful image of the kind of revolution that I believe Jesus calls us to make, an image that you can feel in your body. Two years ago Mark Siler and I were in Charlotte the night before Bank Of America's shareholder meeting and were being trained in how to occupy and hold space in the street. During one exercise several dozen of us sat in pods of six each with arms and legs linked tight. Our natural inclination while performing this was to clench our fists as we anticipated the police's efforts to move us, perhaps by using pain compliance techniques. After we were all set up, though, the trainer offered this bit of pragmatic advice: you can clench up and stay strong, but you don't have to clench your fists to do it.

His point was merely that photography and video of the event would better communicate our values and intent to the public if we were to avoid visual cues like clenched fists that subtly connote aggression. But I've often thought that the moment held a larger lesson, too: to hold space, to project power, to make a difference, we must be prepared to use and sometimes even physically embody tension. But we must be reflective, strategic, disciplined, and proactive in determining how the tension we summon forth as a tool is applied. As nonviolent revolutionaries, we search continually for a middle way forward, around the roadblocks of nonresistance to evil, whereby we lament what's wrong but don't confront it, and the roadblock of responding to evil with evil, where the violence in our hearts is released into the world through our actions, there to do further harm.

Perhaps you saw the article Ethan linked to this week in which Ken brought to our attention a salient quote from the French writer, Albert Camus. He summed up our task well when he once said to a group of Christians, and so also indirectly to us, "What the world expects" is that "you should speak out loud and clear ... in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could arise in the heart of the simplest person. [You] should get away from all abstractions and confront the bloodstained face history has taken on today. We need a group of people resolved to speak out clearly and to pay up personally."

I am grateful to be a part of a community that daily lives out the revolutionary calling to lift the lowly. I guess the question I am posing is whether it's not time to take even more seriously than we have before the accompanying imperative to humble the exalted. It's surely not hubris to believe that if God can use us for the one, then God can use us as well for the other. Both are important; both are necessary; both are vital to our own self-preservation and well being; and both are modeled by Jesus in the gospels.

Jesus' question to Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" is asked once again of each of us at every stage of our lives. The old answers, like the old wineskins Jesus spoke of, just will not serve the needs of this new day. We need new answers, and fast, and at a bare minimum they had better involve the quick cessation of burning carbon-based fuels.

WWJD? What would Jesus do?

WWKD? What would King do?

WWWD? What will we do?

-sermon given by Greg Yost at Circle Of Mercy, Asheville, NC on April 6, 2014