

## Who Do You Say I Am (and does it make a difference)?

A sermon by the Rev. Jane Campbell MacIntyre  
for First Congregational Church UCC, Camden ME  
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### Pentecost 16A

Exodus 1:8-2:10; Psalm 124 or Isaiah 51:1-6; Psalm 138  
**Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20**

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At first glance these readings seem very easy to understand. They are foundational texts we have heard again and again and we understand them in our way. But what do we really know about first century Hebrews?

THE PLACE: This whole scene takes place in Caesarea Philippi, a place about 20 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. In ancient times it was a place dedicated to Baal and then to the god Pan, and then the whole Roman pantheon. It was also a recreation spot for Roman generals, especially the one who began the siege of Jerusalem that ended in the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. So a very historic place. . .

And a thin space, a place where the holy was more easily accessed. There are accounts in the Old Testament about dreams and visions happening in the same general location.

This makes it the perfect place for an insightful revelation. People would believe it could be true. -- "I walked the beach and found peace in the sound of the waves," "I had a revelation in Caesarea Philippi," ... in both cases the response is: 'of course you did.'

THE QUESTIONS: "*Who do they say the Son of Man is?*" and "*What about you, who do you say I am?*" are real questions. Jesus wants to know, not to find out the gossip buzzing around the marketplace, but to actually find out who he was.

We spend time learning 'who we are' deep inside and then we shape a life in harmony with those realizations.

In Jesus' time people did not do the same internal, soul-searching, emotional work to discover who they were. They were more concerned with how they

were perceived, how others would describe them - not as a public relations move, but because who others perceived *was the person they were*.

The answer was very important to Jesus. He need to know his identity. Thinking as a man of his time would think, he would not know who he was until he knew who others thought he was.

It is a very different way of thinking than we are used to.

THE DISCIPLE: Peter - He is often the disciple on making comments or acting out in Matthew, but he usually gets it wrong. This is the time he got it right. *“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”*

- He got the fact that Jesus was the special person the Jewish people had been waiting and waiting and waiting for.
- He got the fact that, in this location with so many gods to choose from, it is the Living God that is the Creator and Spirit behind all that Jesus did and said.

Jesus is very quick to compliment him, but also to comment that he got it right because God sent him the thought, not because he used his own logic to get to the answer. God is the one who is the source of revelations.

I'm sure you've see the children in church listening to the children's story and being asked a question. I'm sure you have also seen that strange expression that says 'I have no idea what I am being asked' come over their faces as they raise their hands to be called on. One of them will answer, "God?" And they are as correct as Peter was, because 'God' is always the real answer, whatever the questioner may have been expecting in Jesus' time and in ours.

THE GIFTS:

Paul tells us that we each have gifts to offer, that our gifts are not the same ones that others have, and that we each need to use them so that this church, this body of Christ, can be whole and accomplish God's mission.

There are workshops and books to help us discern just what our gifts are and that is good and holy work. But I also think we should all probably take up the practice of asking others ‘who they say we are.’ Not to shorten our own internal work, but for revelations of a sort.

I think I know many of my gifts, especially after all the introspection we had to do in seminary. But occasionally a parishioner has said, ‘I don’t think you know what you are bringing to us and you need to know...’ and I have been stunned by the qualities they name - things I had never thought of, things I had never dreamed could be my gifts. Try it. You might be stunned also.

#### THE TRANSFORMATION:

There is a piece of Paul’s passage that I think we ignore in our rush to get to the ‘many gifts/body of Christ’ part of his teaching, and that is the 2<sup>nd</sup> verse:

*Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

Just as with Peter’s answer to Jesus being a revelation from God and not his own logic at work, Paul is telling us that we need to be just as open to God’s revelations - so that God can transform us - which amounts to giving us an entirely different world view.

“*Do not conform to the pattern of this world,*” Paul says. We have skyscrapers, rockets going into space, designer clothes that cost as much as a village would spend on a week’s food, and a world-wide communications web - - and yet we still have the hungry, the naked, the imprisoned, the widow, the orphaned, and the immigrants all waiting for the help they need to exist, to be seen, to be heard.

Until our minds are transformed, our gifts will not be used as appropriately and as effectively as God would wish.

I pray that we will all open ourselves to the disturbing and exciting transformation of the God of Love.

Amen.

2020 08 23 Proper 16A Readings

### **Romans 12:1-8 - New International Version (NIV)**

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead [or do], do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

### **Matthew 9:35-10:8 - New International Version (NIV)**

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Blessing reference:

Valarie Kaur - A sikh activist - founder of the Revolutionary Love Project.

See no stranger, but look at each other and say:

“You are part of me I do not know yet.”<sup>1</sup>

Kaur, Valarie. See *No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*.

Random House. 2020. quote on p 311.