

2020 08 16 – Who Do You Say that I Am? – Part One

Matthew 15:10-28

In 1989 I started attending Bellefair United Church in Toronto. I was 30 years old and looking for community in one of the most populated cities in Canada. There were many things that attracted me to this particular congregation: the warm welcome that I received, their progressive stance on social issues, their very talented choir and even the beauty of their sanctuary. But the thing that kept me there was the opportunity for growth and healing that I experienced in the various study groups that I joined.

In one of the first study groups that I attended, my minister gave me a long list of words that people use to describe Jesus and then asked me to circle the ones that were most meaningful for me. I'm going to invite you now to type one or two words that describe Jesus for you and I will read some of them aloud. *(time for typing and reading)* I'm not sure how many words I circled that day, but I don't think it was very many. The one word I remember is "teacher." If you asked me to do that same exercise today, "teacher" would still be one of the first words I would circle. But it wouldn't be the only one.

This Sunday we are beginning a four week series entitled: "Who Do You Say that I Am?" This series will be an opportunity to explore who Jesus was to his disciples 2000 years ago and who he is for us in the 21st century. We will look at four different scripture passages from the gospel of Matthew and see what they

tell us about Jesus' identity and what it means to be his followers in today's world.

Our scripture reading can be divided into two distinct parts. The first part begins with Jesus calling the crowd together and saying to them, "Hear this and understand." This is a moment that occurs over and over again in the gospels. In this moment, Jesus is beginning to teach. This particular lesson downplays the significance of following the strict Jewish cleanliness laws and instead emphasizes the importance of right relationship. He says, "it's not what enters your mouth that defiles you—it's what comes out of your mouth that defiles you."

At the beginning of this chapter, the Pharisees and teachers of the law had come to Jesus and said, "Why do your disciples violate the tradition of the elders? They don't perform a ritual hand-washing before they eat." In response, Jesus called the Jewish leaders hypocrites and told them rules and doctrines were useless if their hearts were far from God. Later, when his disciples asked for an explanation Jesus said, and I paraphrase, "when our hearts are filled with evil intentions such as murder, infidelity, stealing, lying, even foul language, then all the ritual hand washing in the world will not make us clean."

Jesus taught the crowd and his disciples an important lesson that day and he taught it knowing that it would offend the leaders of the synagogue, the holders of the Jewish traditions and laws. Jesus was a brave and a bold teacher. His disciples even called him Rabbi, a title of distinction that is still used to recognize and to honour scholars and leaders in today's synagogues.

As Jesus' followers, we have much to learn from his teachings. In this time of COVID-19, when hand-washing has become much more than a sacred ritual, consider how important it is to be empathetic and kind in order to stay in right relationship with our neighbours. In British Columbia, Dr Bonnie Henry has coined the now famous slogan: "Be kind. Be calm. Be safe." Yes, it is good to follow our many new cleanliness rules, but, as Jesus taught, it is even more important that we stay in right relationship with God and we do that by loving and caring for our neighbours.

Jesus was a rabbi, a teacher but in the second half of today's scripture we are introduced to another part of his identity. Jesus is travelling, with his disciples, in the district of Tyre and Sidon and a woman cries out to him for help. Her daughter is ill, and she believes Jesus can heal her child. The author refers to this woman as a Canaanite. In reality the Canaanite people no longer exist. But at one-time they were an enemy of the Israelites. So the author is emphasizing the fact that this woman is not Jewish, she is not a member of the twelve tribes of Israel, she is certainly not a descendant of King David, she is, in fact, "the other."

Jesus' disciples ask him, over and over, to get rid of this Canaanite and finally Jesus turns to the woman and dismisses her, saying, "My mission is only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel." When she pleads with him again, he answers, "But it isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Yes, Jesus

called her a dog. In fact, as a woman, we could even say he called her, “a bitch.”
It kind of takes your breath away doesn't it!

But the woman doesn't give up. She replies, “True Rabbi, but even the dogs get to eat the scraps that fall from the table.” She's basically saying, “I may not be part of your family, your culture, your religion, but I am still worthy, and my daughter's life has meaning. She deserves to live.”

I wonder how long Jesus took to reply. I can just picture his mind churning as he took in the woman's words, as he struggled with his understanding of his mission and put it beside his understanding of God's commandment to love your neighbour. I believe that in this moment, Jesus, the teacher, became Jesus, the student. In this moment, Jesus' understanding of his mission expanded. In this moment, Jesus realized that his message of God's love, his message of God's reign of peace and justice was not just for the Israelites. And he responded, “Woman you have great faith! Your wish will come to pass.” At that very moment her daughter was healed.

This is one of my favourite scripture passages. I love this passage because it illustrates Jesus' humanity, his ability to make mistakes and to learn from them. Yes, Jesus is a teacher, and, like all of us, Jesus is also a student, a life-long learner. He doesn't have it all figured out when he begins his ministry. He learns by doing. He learns by listening. And, especially he learns by interacting with “the other,” with those who are different, even with those he would call “the enemy.”

When I thought about who might be the “Canaanite woman,” who might be seen as “the other” or even as “the enemy” in our world, our Hutterite neighbours immediately came to mind. We are all very aware that many Hutterite colonies are struggling with COVID-19 and some have even lost loved ones to this pandemic. In the last few weeks, our Hutterite neighbours have quickly become “the enemy,” “the lepers,” of our society. How many of us are harbouring feelings of anger, frustration, and even fear towards these people who choose to live differently than the rest of us?

For a moment, let us imagine what life is like for our Hutterite neighbours right now. For a moment, let us try to step into their sensible shoes and imagine what they are feeling, what they are experiencing. How would you feel if someone in your family were sick with this virus? This brings up a whole new set of emotions, doesn't it? Instead of fear and anger, we begin to experience empathy, concern and caring. We may even ask ourselves, “What can we do to help?”

As followers of Jesus, we are called to live lives based on what Jesus taught and on how he lived. We are called to be life-long learners, to be willing to make mistakes and to learn from them, to be willing to listen to ideas different from our own and to take them in, to be willing to interact with “the other” and to be changed.