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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA X32
12 Pentecost (Proper 16A) 8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
Sunday 27 August 2017

Isaiah 51:1-6
Psalm 138
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:13-20

What Do You Say?

"Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug" (Isa. 51).

What do you say? What do you say when someone asks you *the question*? On Friday a reporter from CNN interviewed me. She began by describing religion as a taboo topic in Silicon Valley, how an anti-child pornography hacker she knew felt embarrassed to say at a conference that he was motivated by his faith. Then she went on about Artificial Intelligence, robots, and what she called "humanoid things." We talked about moral issues that my friends in technology face and about social media which she called our new "hyper-connected reality."¹

After a delightful conversation she finally asked me what was on her mind. She pointedly said, "do you think technology will eventually replace religion?" It is related to a question you may be asked yourself. What do you believe? Why do you believe it? How does all this make a difference in your life?

We all have moments like this and yet we still don't know exactly what to say. It sure would be surprising if we responded by reciting the Nicene Creed (I wonder if our hearer would be polite and listen to the whole thing). I guess we could say that, "Jesus is Lord." But what would that even mean to the people around us? What does it mean to us?²

Questions do not function merely as a way of gathering information. At the right moment, in the right context, with the right people, a question can be a kind of gateway into a new relationship.³

This morning, like my new friend from CNN, Jesus is asking questions. The disciples have been traveling a long road with him. They probably feel disoriented by all the miracles like the healing of lepers and a man's withered hand (Mt. 8, 12). They have seen massive crowds fed and watched as Jesus walked out to them over hills of water through the chaos of a storm (Mt. 15).

He has trusted them to share his power and mission, to tell his story of God's love even for the most broken and damaged people. He has taught them with all his might using any symbol or story at hand, through parables about lamps, leaven, brothers, mustard seeds, sowers, weeds, wheat, pearls and treasures.

After all this I can imagine a certain tension when Jesus sits them down to review what he has taught, to see where they are on their journey toward really becoming children of God. He asks two questions.

First Jesus says, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" This is the relatively more comfortable question, the safer one. It is easy to share what *other* people have been saying. It does not involve either committing oneself to a particular position or even showing just how little we really know. You can imagine each one chiming in to answer, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets" (Mt. 16).

Then Jesus asks the tough question. "But who do you say that I am?" This shifts the conversation. It is no longer about something outside of them. I can picture it, the disciples' uncomfortable silence, their effort to avoid eye contact and yet still look normal. It reminds me of standing in the old locker room of Memorial Stadium during half time in college. We were not playing well. Our rugby coach Jack Clark stormed into the room, slammed the door and let the silence just sit there for a few beats. Then he said, "What do you think you were doing out there!" It was that kind of silence.

And we were smart enough not to say anything. But apparently that was not Peter's style. Of the disciples Peter is famous for not understanding, for being impulsive and then not following through. He is the one Jesus addresses in saying, "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" (Mt. 26:41). At the Transfiguration Peter offers to build tabernacles in such an inappropriate way he has to be corrected by God. Peter is the one who asks to get out of the boat but then fails to walk on water. At the Last Supper Peter promises to never desert Jesus and the next day denies his friend three times.

In this case Peter blurts out, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Jesus responds, "blessed are you... for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.... on this rock I will build my church. I will give you the keys of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven."

This has to be one of the most misunderstood biblical passages of all time. Too often it has been read as entitlement, as if Peter, or now the church, has the keys and will determine who gets in. How we read this passage in worship contributes to this mistake. To understand we need to hear the whole story.

Only a few verses later Jesus warns the disciples that he has to fulfill his mission and be killed in Jerusalem. Perhaps emboldened by Jesus' earlier praise Peter rebukes him. Jesus replies saying, "Get behind me Satan... you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Mt. 16:23). Peter is not the judge of all people at the pearly gates. He is more like the teenager who gets the keys and immediately goes out and wrecks the family car.

But my hunch is that this boldness is one of the things Jesus loves about him. Peter does not worry so much about getting everything right. He stands out not for his wisdom, compassion, or gifts as a speaker or leader but because of his willingness to try, to jump right in. He is blessed not because he is perfect or has nothing to regret, but because something makes him get out of his own way. He is not afraid to be wrong or embarrassed. At his best he is led not by his ego but by the Spirit.

Brothers and sisters we find ourselves in the midst of disorienting times. We were horrified by the Charlottesville images of neo-Nazis chanting anti-Semitic and racist slogans and the martyrdom of Heather Heyer. National business leaders resigned commission posts because of the president's, at best, ambivalent response to racism. Then far right groups received permits for a demonstration in Boston last week and then one for yesterday here at Chrissy Field. We had to check the news every few hours as plans changed.

Daily life at the Cathedral turned upside down. We have been writing letters, sermons, newspaper articles, planning prayer services, participating in marches, gathering at Temple Emmanuel with two hundred people overflowing out of the Chapel of Grace – expressing our deep faith that God loves all people without exception.

Perhaps I'm the only one but I feel manipulated and a little confused. Who are these fringe groups? How many people are we talking about? What do they stand for? Are they going to harm my Jewish friends? Is it becoming even more dangerous to be an African American, or an immigrant, or a GLBTQ person?

The Internet made it possible for many of the right wing groups to meet. It probably had a determining role in last year's election. It certainly gives us a daily picture of what our president is thinking. In the twenty-first century technology forms our identity in a totally new and dizzying way. It mixes up the personal and the public. Pictures of our family arrive on social media feeds along with images of world leaders, who for that matter do not seem very different from television celebrities.

You may not like it, but you also have a different voice today. The question, "what do you believe?" is coming at you in a new way. So what are you going to say? What are you going to say about human dignity, the meaning of America, your encounter with holiness?

In the interview with CNN I had to explain that religion is not some kind of deficient form of science. Science and religion are two totally different categories like tennis racquets and saxophones, each good for different kinds of projects. Over two hundred years ago the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher wrote his book *On Religion*:

Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers because his audience believed that religion was dying out. It didn't.

Faith still exists because God does and because we are fundamentally religious beings. We use symbols and stories to orient and shape our desires. We believe in the sanctity of moral laws. At a certain level we remain a mystery to ourselves. We are creatures who dream. We are attracted to mystery. We long for the Transcendent.

Let me close with two answers to "the question." During a period of terrible disappointment in the Civil Right's Movement, the African American novelist James Baldwin (1924-1987) was asked what he would teach if he had students.

He said, "I would try to make [them] know that just as American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it, so is the world larger, more daring, more beautiful and more terrible, but principally larger – and that it belongs to [them]."⁴ What will your message be?

A sentence from the Apostle Paul became my message last week. He writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you will discern the will of God" (Rom. 12). Last week I said goodbye to our oldest son at the airport as he was leaving home for the first time to college on the East Coast. During that last embrace I whispered in his ear, "Don't forget who you are."

I meant do not forget that you are a child of God. You are a holy one, a saint whose voice could be the way others come to experience God.

During the chaos of the storms do not forget that questions are not merely a way of gathering information. They can be doors into something new. This week I pray for your willingness to jump right in. With the boldness of Paul, on the hyperconnected reality of the Internet and in person, tell someone what you believe. You have something so precious to offer. Take the risk.

¹ Selena Larson, "Unpublished Interview," CNN, Friday 25 August 2017.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "God's Rock," *The Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 70.

³ Professors teach law students to never ask a question in court that they do not already know the answer to. There are abusive questions, leading questions, loaded questions and Socratic questions. See the introduction to 10 Pent (8-21-11) 16A.

⁴ Quoted in a letter from Yale University president Peter Slovey called "Reflections After Charlottesville," 16 August 2017.