



One of Us?

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
Sunday, August 24, 2008*

Matthew 16:13-20:

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

One of my favorite TV shows, unfortunately cancelled a few years ago, was *Joan of Arcadia*. It was a fascinating show about a teenager who literally encountered God in many different guises—one week God was a little girl, another a punk teenager, another a school cafeteria worker and so on. But the part of the show that always caught my attention was the theme song—a song by rock singer Joan Osborne entitled *One of Us*. The song asked the question, “what if God was one of us, just a slob like one of us, just a stranger on the bus trying to make his way home. . . .” I’m guessing some may have been offended by her image of God, but I found it fascinating—and at heart a profoundly incarnational statement. Joan Osborne nailed the central claim of Christianity; that God became human—a stranger on the bus, if you like.

As I mentioned last week, it is sometimes hard for us to see Jesus as anything but a stained-glass figure with a beatific expression on his face and a halo on his head. We have all sorts of fancy language to talk about Jesus—sophisticated theologies to explain this God-man. So we often fail to remember that he was quite human and that those who were with him, those characters in the Gospel narrative, knew him as a human. They struggled to understand who this person was—this person who could do amazing things, who understood and taught Scripture in a way they had never heard before. They marveled as Dr. Norman Pott writes, “at his ability to touch and heal people who had no hope. (At the) ‘compassion that could provide a community of acceptance for all kinds of people, so many of whom were excluded at all other places in that society.’” They watched him and they wondered. Some proclaimed him to be an agent of the devil, perhaps even the devil himself, or a crazy man. Some saw him as a great prophet, perhaps Elijah or Jeremiah. Some saw John the Baptist. And Jesus must have been aware of the gossip and speculation. So, as we hear today, after giving the disciples the chance to tell him who others think he is, he turns the tables and asks them the direct question, “What about you. Who do you say that I am?” At this point I imagine there was something of a silence as some of the disciples developed an instant fascination with their feet and others felt the need to studiously scan the horizon. Finally, after who knows how long, because the text doesn’t tell us, Peter blurts out, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And he gets a “well done” from Jesus. And then he spends the rest of his life trying to figure out and live into his answer.

And so the question is now directed at you and me. It’s a loaded question, a dangerous question—one that we need to contemplate and dwell on, because our answer has implications for how we live. If we answer that Jesus is purely God, Jesus is completely different and other from us, if there is nothing human about him, then it becomes easy for us to dismiss him and in so doing dismiss the sanctity of human life—and we thus live our lives differently. If we can connect to, see, the humanity of Jesus as the disciples could, then perhaps we can connect to the conviction they arrived at that God was somehow active, present, interacting with and speaking through, healing through this human life. What Peter was confronted with, what we are confronted with, is the miracle of incarnation—

the presence of God in human flesh, in human life. We are confronted with the possibility, the reality that human life is the dwelling place of God and the means of Divine activity in the world. We can see that we can become, we *are* the body of Christ. We can see ourselves as dwelling in and with God, and we can see the same thing in others. And we will live our lives differently; see ourselves and the world differently. We will begin to reflect, embody, that compassionate, loving presence to the world.

Now all of this may sound a bit otherworldly and impossible, but God, enfleshed in humans, moves and acts all the time. My guess is you could think of a few God moments, God stories yourself. I would like to share one such story with you—the story of Mary Leonard.

On the school playground, the other first graders taunted her, “Oh, Mary Ann,” they would say, “What’s wrong with your mouth?” And Mary Ann would say that when she was a baby she had fallen down and cut her lip on a piece of glass. That was a lie, but somehow she thought, to have suffered an injury was better than having been born ugly. The truth is that Mary Ann Bird was born with a number of birth defects: a cleft palate, which led to garbled speech; crossed eyes; a disfigured face; a crooked nose; lopsided feet; and complete deafness in one ear. Everything was hard for her and interacting with the other children at recess and on the bus was a nightmare. Worst of all was the annual hearing test, when the teacher would call each child forward in the classroom. It happened on the first day of school. The child covered one ear and the teacher whispered a simple phrase like, “the grass is green” or “it’s fun to play kickball” in the other ear. And the child was asked to repeat the phrase. Then the child was asked to cover the other ear and the whisper test was repeated.

One child, a girl who knew Mary Ann was deaf in one ear, trying to scare her, told her that if she failed the test, she would be sent away to a special school. It worked. Mary Ann was terrified, and when it came time for the test in the first grade, she simply cheated. She pretended to block her deaf ear and managed to find a way to fool the first-grade teacher.

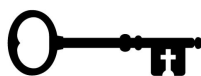
In second grade, Mary Ann’s teacher was Miss Leonard, the most beloved and respected teacher in the school. And late in the morning on the first day of school, it was time for the annual hearing test. Mary Ann was frightened. As the children were called forward one by one, Mary Ann could see that Miss Leonard was careful about how she administered the test. She stood behind each child, placing a soundproof pad over one ear and then she would say into the other ear in a soft voice, “you have new shoes” or “the sky is blue.” Then she would ask each child to repeat what she said. It was clear that Mary Ann would not be able to fool Miss Leonard. She was sure that she would be sent away to a special school. She could feel the tears pooling up in her eyes, and that is when she heard Miss Leonard call her name. It was Mary Ann’s turn for the whisper test, and she wished at that moment that she was never born, or that she could be born again as a little girl someone would want, someone would love just as she was.

Mary Ann, the little girl with crossed eyes and cleft palate, came forward for her test. Miss Leonard covered her deaf ear with the soundproof pad and whispered in her ear, “the sky is blue.” “The sky is blue,” Mary Ann repeated. And then Miss Leonard covered Mary Ann’s hearing ear so that the world fell silent. A few seconds later she felt Miss Leonard lift the pad ever so slightly so that Mary Ann could hear again. She knew that Miss Leonard was protecting her. And forty years later, Mary Ann Bird, who is today a beloved elementary school teacher, remembers what happened next. “I waited for those words which God must have put into Miss Leonard’s mouth,” she says, “those seven words that changed my life forever. Miss Leonard did not say “the sky is blue” or “you have new shoes.” Letting me hear with my hearing ear, tilting the scale in my favor, what she whispered was, “I wish you were my little girl. I wish you were my little girl.”

One of the questions Joan Osborne asks in her song, *One of Us*, is “if God had a face what would it look like?” I think I know how Mary Ann would answer that question—God would look like Miss Leonard bending over and whispering in her ear.

That seemingly small encounter changed Mary Ann’s life forever. That encounter with God, enfleshed for that moment in Miss Leonard, that encounter with love and compassion, altered how Mary Ann saw herself, how she saw the world. Now I don’t pretend to know what was going on in Miss Leonard’s mind when she whispered those precious words to Mary Ann. But I can guess what her answer to Jesus’ question, “Who do you say that I am,” would be. It would be something like, “you are the one in whom we see God’s intent for humanity, the one in whom we see love, compassion and mercy. The one who calls us to love, compassion and mercy. You are God incarnate.”

Who do you say that I am? Think carefully before you respond—because you will spend the rest of your life figuring out and living into your answer.



Open hearts. Open minds.