

Who Are We?

Mark 8:27-38 September 13, 2009

I'm sure most of us remember either seeing or hearing about the mess up when President Barack Obama took the oath of office on January 20, 2009 – how Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, John Roberts, flipped the word *faithfully* from its rightful place before “execute the office of President” to the end of the oath offering Obama the phrase to repeat “execute the office of President faithfully.” While the political pundits had a wonderful time postulating what it might mean, whose fault it was, etc., the real question most of us mouthed was, “What does it really matter?” I mean the two phrases say basically the same thing.

One religious commentator of note added this thought: “Besides, the 20th Amendment to the Constitution states that the terms of the outgoing president and vice president shall end at noon on the 20th day of January, and the terms of their successors shall then begin. There is absolutely no mention of an oath office. So, according to this amendment, the transfer of power could have happened with George W. Bush giving Barack Obama a fist-bump at high noon on January 20.

“(Now) that would (have been) worth standing in the cold to see.”¹

When Peter offered his two cents – his take – his understanding – about who he believed Jesus to be, he didn't mess the words of his pledge of allegiance up. And yet, following Jesus isn't all about knowing the right words – speaking the right words. Despite Peter's correct word usage, he didn't understand what he was saying. Leonard Sweet offers in his thoughts on this text: “Peter nails the oath but not the office. He does a great job pledging his allegiance to Jesus, but he doesn't grasp what the job of following the Messiah is all about.”²

The question this morning for us is, do we? Do we know – do we understand – who we are when we call Jesus our Savior, our Lord, our Master, the Messiah? Who are we when we say we are Christians, servants of Jesus Christ, followers, a community of faith?

Let's back up a bit. Jesus and his followers were on the road and he put this question to them: “Who do people say that I am?” “What's the word on the street about me?” “What are they twittering about me?”³

And the answers the disciples offer are all over the place – John the Baptist, Elijah, one of the prophets. Then Jesus asked them to share their own perspective: “Who do you say that I am?” And to the surprise of no one, Peter spoke up and offered: “You are the Messiah.”

It took a lot of guts on the part of Peter to say that out loud really. I mean, if it was true the cat was out of the bag and it was going to be time to move into action. And if it wasn't, well, heaven help Peter. He could have been stoned as a blasphemer. But, Peter said it anyway. And, according to Mark's version, Jesus again told everyone to keep quiet about it – he put a muzzle on everyone.

Then Jesus started talking about suffering and rejection and sacrifice and death. Remember: those who heard Peter's statement of faith had in their minds that the reference was about political power, violence, destruction of the Roman Empire, vengeance, war, victory. That's why Peter jumped to his feet and attempted to quiet Jesus – he believed what Jesus was sharing was a contradiction in terms. He couldn't fathom the concept of a cross before a crown – a crown other than that of a political ruler of a secular kingdom. That's the first thing we need to accept about ourselves as followers of Jesus – that the cross comes before a crown – that it's not just about talking about Jesus – it's about living cross-like lives – risking rejection, sacrificing, suffering sometimes.

Being a follower of Jesus means primarily that we take seriously divine matters rather than human things. How do we do that? What does this mean? Does it mean that we should spend all our time praying in private? Does it mean that we should develop a code of morality and keep as far away from anything evil as we can?⁴

Well, that's not quite who we are to be. Jesus started talking about the need to deny ourselves – to take up our cross and – here's the kicker – follow him. If we are to execute the office of disciple, we have to follow Jesus – something we're not always so good at doing.

In their book *ReJesus* Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch observe: “A good church upbringing will do many marvelous things for you. (But one of the unfortunate things it does is it) convinces you that Jesus is to be worshiped but not followed.”⁵

Todd Spencer quoted Fr. Richard Rohr saying in an address to Yale University medical students: “You know, Jesus never once said, ‘Worship me.’ He said, ‘Follow me.’ One of the cleverest ways to avoid following someone is to worship him. It really works; it's very clever. You just put him on a pedestal, you make God out of him and you pay all kinds of homage to this God figure, and then you don't have to do what he did.”⁶

Who are we when we think of ourselves as disciples of Jesus Christ? We are followers – those who deny ourselves – steep ourselves in the gospels, in the stories about Jesus, so much so that we can't help doing something when we see injustice around us.

A preacher received a letter from a woman with a money order for \$26.30 made out to his church. The letter read: “Dear Rev. Brinton ... I read a sermon of yours in *The Washington Post* ... You spoke of not playing it safe. Not to punt when it is a fourth-and-one situation and to keep striving. To keep striving – that really spoke to a need in my heart. It encouraged me, and the Lord spoke to me through your words.

“I was laid off from my job at the end of October. There are many needs in my life, or so it seems. But what I desperately need more than anything is a closer walk with God.

“About two months ago, the Lord told me to write and send the tithe on my unemployment check. It's taken that long to obey and stop listening to the voice in my head telling me how pathetic I am, and obey the one in my heart telling me to obey.”⁷

Did you catch that? The check for \$26.30 was a tithe of her unemployment check. It was her sacrificing to mark her new resolve to walk closer with God. She ended her letter to Rev. Brinton with: “Please pray for me.” My sense is that I need that woman to be praying for me – this follower of Christ's – that I might be as ready to do what it takes to order my life in Jesus' footsteps.

We've got to hand it to Jesus. He was honest about what it was going to take to follow him. He wasn't offering peace and security – prosperity and good health. When you tell people that if they want to follow you they have to be ready to take up a cross – that they have to be ready to be regarded as a criminal – ready to die – well, you're pretty gutsy. Jesus wasn't willing to lure us to him by offering us an easy pass through life, despite what many who speak on his behalf say in order to get people to give or join their nitch of Christendom. What Jesus offers us is the cross.

Want to know who you are? – Deny yourself.

Want to know who you are? – take up the cross of human suffering.

Want to know who you are? – lose your life.

Want to know who you are? – don't sacrifice honor for profit.

Want to know who you are? – don't sacrifice principle for popularity.

Want to know who you are? – don't sacrifice eternity for a moment of glory.

Want to know who you are? – don't be ashamed of Jesus Christ.

John and Jo Perry-Sumwalt help put who we are in focus with a story they wrote about a woman named Emma and a man named Harvey – two long-time members of the same church.

Emma's grandfather purchased a goldplated cross while on a trip in the Holy Lands in 1902 and had it shipped home for his church. Between the purchase and the shipping the gift cost him a great deal.

Well, in 1980 Harvey thought it was time to replace the beautiful, gold Holy Land cross with a “rough-hewn, life-sized wooden cross.” It created quite the debate in the church with Emma's mother making an

impassioned speech about the importance of her father's "loving and beautiful contribution to the worship experience of their church." Harvey had the gall to call Emma's "...grandfather's cross a gaudy museum piece that had nothing to do with Jesus or his sacrifice for us."

The battle waged on for several years. A new pastor was appointed and decided that Harvey's argument was pretty convincing and that it was time to make a change. He began to use Harvey's cross at the Saturday night service. "The Sunday morning after that first Saturday night service, Emma and her mother entered the sanctuary early only to find that 'old rugged cross' still standing in the chancel." For many years after that Emma's mother and then Emma herself after Emma's mother died, would every Saturday morning carefully remove the Holy Land cross from the chancel and then after the Saturday evening service lovingly return it to the altar. Harvey would do the opposite.

Well, one Saturday night Emma was riding with her cross in the elevator all the while rehearsing in her heart and mind the history that had caused her to have to shoulder such a responsibility. When the elevator stopped and the doors opened, right in front of her stood Harvey with his "'old rugged cross' perched on his shoulder just like Jesus on his way to Golgotha."

Seeing Emma, Harvey made some snorting, bull-like sounds and then, instead of stepping aside to let Emma out, he proceeded into the elevator and jammed his cross in with him in such a way that Emma couldn't get out. Trying to situate his cross in the crowded elevator Harvey accidentally bumped the elevator button, causing the door to close and the two enemies to start descending together. Then, Harvey accidentally hit the buttons again and the elevator came to a complete halt between the floors. They were stuck.

Listen to the way the Sumwalts describe what happened next: "Emma was fully prepared to tear into Harvey for his rudeness, until she saw the surprised look on his face and realized that he hadn't really meant to get them stuck. After a few minutes of his button punching, door pounding and calling for help, she set grandfather's cross in the safety of the corner behind her. She helped lift the 'old rugged cross' off Harvey's shoulder and lean it against the wall. Then she sat down as daintily as the limited space allowed. When another forty minutes had passed without any hope of rescue, Harvey did the same."

Well, Emma and Harvey were finally rescued by the custodian and minister. When they walked out of the elevator, Harvey unloaded his burden onto the janitor and told him to put it in the trash bin. Emma put her cross in the pastor's arms and told her that she thought it would be appropriate to permanently place it on the altar in the chapel. Then the two of them announced that they would be taking a proposal to the worship taskforce proposing that a new cross be purchased for the sanctuary and the two of them would be sharing the cost.

But, what really caused the custodian's and minister's chins to almost hit the floor, was when Harvey held out his arm to Emma and invited her to go out for a cup of coffee and a ride home. The closing line of the story is: "No one was ever told just what had occurred in that elevator in those three and a half hours. But it had a lasting effect on Emma and Harvey and on the church as well."⁸

Who we are if we are followers of Jesus Christ's are people who deny ourselves – who take up Jesus Christ's cross. Who we are, are people who deny ourselves of our rights to selfishness, bitterness, revenge, martyrdom, jealousy, hatred, personal goals, material riches, comfort, popularity, etc.

Thomas Cannon was a postal worker in Richmond, Virginia. He lived on the edge of poverty most of his life. He did so because he was committed to giving to those in need. He was described as a "poor man's philanthropist." He gave away more than \$150,000 in his lifetime to people who were having a tough time of it – to people who were unusually kind or brave.

He claimed that it all began as a result of a tragic explosion while he was in the Navy. Many of his shipmates were killed. Because he lived, a commitment to help others was born in him. He said that he decided that he was going to be a role model – that he was going to try and inspire others to see what he called "the oneness of it all."⁹

“Cannon gave to people of all ages, races, nationalities and incomes. He gave checks to a low-income woman who started a youth center in her apartment complex ... to retired postal worker who was regular volunteer at an elementary school ... to a woman and man who wanted to return to Vietnam to visit their hometown ... to an advocate for the victims of crime ... and to a teenager who had been abandoned as an infant, but grew up to be named Virginia’s Youth of the Year.”¹⁰

His family sacrificed a lot in order for him to give the way he gave. He never made over \$20,000 a year. When he and his wife retired they lived near the poverty line. He once said that they lived simply so that they could give money away.

His only request when he died was: “Help somebody.”¹¹

Followers of Jesus Christ deny themselves and sacrifice for the good of others. Who we are as followers of Jesus Christ are person who walk the talk – who deny ourselves for the good of others.

Let us pray.

1. Leonard Sweet, “Oaths and Offices,” Homiletics, September – October, 2009, p. 20.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 21.
5. Ibid., p. 21.
6. Fr. Richard Rohr, November 2005, at Yale University as quoted by Leonard Sweet, “Oaths and Offices.”
7. “Oaths and Offices,” p. 23.
8. John & Jo Perry-Sumwalt, “Cross Foolishness,” Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), pp. 174-177.
9. Unknown source
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.