

What About Jesus?

Matthew 16:13-20

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A rock singer, Joan Osborne, had a song in the mid 1990's called "One of Us" that was nominated for a Grammy Award and caught my attention at the time. Here's the chorus:

What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Tryin' to make his way home?

Many sincere Christians were offended by the song, taking it as a cynical put down of the faith. The idea of meeting God as a stranger on the bus seemed to these folks to be on or across the borderline of blasphemy.

But on the other hand, isn't that exactly the central affirmation of our faith, that God has met us in a human being, Jesus of Nazareth? Our problem is that we do not initially meet Jesus as a human being. We encounter Jesus in the lofty doctrines of the church, in the grandeur of a stained-glass window, in stories from the Bible, or in a piece of classic art with a halo hovering over his head. Have you ever seen a stranger on the bus who you thought was Jesus?

So, it is hard for us to put ourselves in the shoes of the first followers of Jesus: Peter, Bartholomew, Mary Magdalene, James, John, and Salome, and the others who met him first of all as a human being. And yet from the very beginning of their relationship with him there was wonder, there was awe, there was more than they could explain with the usual answers.

Where did he get this extraordinary authority to speak with such boldness and conviction, words which were such a breath of fresh air? How was it that his prayer, his touch could bring healing to people who had no hope? The kind of compassion which could provide a community of acceptance for all kinds of people, so many of whom were excluded at all other places in that society?

Some who were outraged by Jesus' lifestyle and ministry said, "He gets it from the Devil." But others saw him in the tradition of the great Old Testament prophets, "another Jeremiah or Elijah," they said. Still others found the spirit of the recently executed John the Baptist reborn in Jesus. So there was speculation everywhere. Finally, according to the Gospel story, there came a time in the experience of his closest followers, a pivotal moment, when he asked them point blank, "how about you, what do you think?" And Peter, without hesitation, said the biggest thing he could, "you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Peter's answer does not connect easily to our time, I suppose. We are not a part of a society that is eagerly awaiting a Messiah, nor do we live in a culture that is filled with gods like the Greco-Roman world.

Many Biblical scholars suggest that Peter's answer reflects the times that Matthew's Gospel addresses, when the church toward the end of the first century is proclaiming Jesus as Messiah to the Jewish community, and as the Son of God to the Gentiles.

But if Peter's answer connects more readily to that time than this time, what does come to us with clear and present import is Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" After all of these years, we have not exhausted the meaning, the power, the beauty that the life of Jesus

expresses, and so the question comes across the years to address each generation, "Who do you say that I am?"

As we consider our response, it seems to me that Biblical scholarship on the life of Jesus over the past century can serve us, because it has helped us to recover the reality that the disciples first met Jesus as a human being, and were brought to the point of trying to express their extraordinary, developing conviction that God was present, active, speaking, giving, healing through this human life. As someone has suggested, our faith is not so much resting on the hope that Jesus is like God, as if we were experts on what God is like, but our faith is resting on the hope God is like Jesus: compassionate, forgiving, accepting, welcoming.

If Jesus is not fully human, if he is of different stuff than us, then Christian faith becomes ancient history. We go back 2000 years to an event in a faraway time and place, and the faith becomes a kind of hero worship. But if Jesus is human as we are human, then the faith becomes absolutely current, pertinent, and awaiting our response.

What Peter and the other disciples confronted was the central Biblical miracle, the fancy academic term is incarnation, the presence of God in the human, God as one of us. The challenge and the invitation that Jesus holds before us is the possibility that we too as human beings can be the temples of God's presence, the vehicles of God's action. We can enter into the realm of God in the world. We can become the body of Christ. If we affirm God in Jesus, we are open to the possibility of God in ourselves.

If that sounds too lofty and theological, think of it in terms of the incident that arises out of the lore surrounding the Polish pianist, Paderewski. A mother wanted to encourage the progress of her young son at the piano and so she bought two tickets to a Paderewski performance.

When the night arrived, she found their seats near the front of the concert hall, and they eyed the large Steinway parked by itself on the stage. Soon the mother found a friend to talk with and she did not notice the boy slip away.

When 8:00 p.m. arrived the house light dimmed, the spotlights came on, the Steinway was bathed in light, and only then did this mother notice that her son was seated at the piano bench, where he began innocently to plunk the keys in a rendition of Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.

The audience roared, his mother gasped, but before she could retrieve her son, Paderewski himself appeared and moved quickly towards the keyboard. "No, don't quit, keep on playing," he whispered to the boy.

And reaching past him with his left hand the Master began improvising a bass part, and then with his right hand, he reached around on the other side of the boy to add a running obbligato. The crowd was spell bound and the piece concluded in thunderous applause as the boy announced, "I didn't know I could do that."

That's incarnation. We are only human; we may not feel worthy or able, but by some miracle of grace, it is the human that God uses. God whispers in our ear, maybe directly, maybe through the voices of other people, "don't quit, keep on playing," and as we continue, we are lovingly enfolded, graciously inspired, and from our feeble efforts something wonderful can emerge if we are open to the possibility.

Frederick Buechner, a popular Christian teacher, and commentator among pastors of my generation, grew up among the elite of the very sophisticated Ivy League. He rubbed elbows with very urbane people, many of whom fancied themselves too mature as modern-day folk to engage in anything resembling traditional pious talk about God or spirituality. Indeed, when as

a young man Buechner mentioned at a high brow New York City dinner party that he was going to seminary to become a pastor, his hostess for the evening fixed Buechner in an incredulous gaze before asking, "A pastor? Really. Tell me, was this your own idea or were you ill-advised?"

Many years later, Buechner taught a semester at Wheaton College in suburban Chicago. At lunch one day, sitting with some students, he overheard one student very casually ask another, "What has God been doing in your life lately?" Buechner observed that if a question like that were asked in New York City, the ground would open up, buildings would crumble, and grown men would faint dead away.

Could the same could be said for urbane, sophisticated, and well-educated Madison, Wisconsin? Religious demographers characterize Madison as a post-Christian city, a city where the role and impact of Christianity in shaping societal values and norms, have significantly diminished. The truth is that God talk, for the most part, is just not very acceptable in the culture we live in.

And yet Jesus comes to us even in post-Christian Madison, across the years, yet still vividly, powerfully, beautifully, and the question remains, "Who do *you* say that I am?" If we meet him like Peter as a human being, as if he was one of us, we are not only saying something about Jesus. We are opening ourselves to a possibility. That God may be doing something in my life, and that we, too, can be the temples of God's presence, the vehicles of God's action.

So,
What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us
Just a stranger on the bus
Tryin' to make his way home...in your life?

Ask yourself today: If Jesus should call on you and ask you the question, "Who do *you* say that I am?" Are you ready to answer him with your life, your money, your decisions, your time, your vocation, your retirement years, your kindness, your humility? And you may start sweating the second you realize that you're going to want to answer with something more than just your words.

But guess what? Whatever you say, and however you say it today, you will not only be saying something powerful about Jesus. You will also be conveying to the world something that is deeply personal and authentic about you.

"Who do YOU say that I am?"

Amen.