

If your church was in search of a new minister in the Boston area in the early nineties, the word on the street was that if you were going to hire a fresh seminary graduate, you should choose someone from Andover Newton Theological School. Because if you called someone from Harvard Divinity School, it would be at least five years before they learned on the job what Andover Newton students could do right out of school. As an Andover Newton student, I took that particular bias as a great comfort – maybe there would be a job out there for me!

But I do know why people said that because I took some theology courses over at Harvard Divinity School and I have to admit I felt completely intimidated by the sheer intelligence of the professors there. They could lecture for over an hour on the most minute theological point, bringing up one thought stream after another, questioning and exploring in what seemed like a hundred different directions until finally their vast constellation of conjecture somehow breathtakingly came together into a clear and brilliant conclusion that proved their own academic thesis with a skill that very few could ever match. Well, that's why they were at Harvard. It was at times truly awesome to witness and there is great value in the challenging way they taught. But it was true that, in those classes as we studied all the great thinkers of the ages, we spent all our time analyzing their arguments and comparing them to each other. Not once in that or any other class at Harvard Divinity School was I ever asked how what I was learning was impacting my life and ministry. The courses were all about the great thinkers and what they thought, and how what they thought compared to what other thinkers thought. How the material moved and shaped me as a pastor was irrelevant because the education at Harvard was purely – and world-respectedly – academic.

But over at little Andover Newton, whatever the subject of a class was, we were constantly being asked to answer the question, “So when you get into the parish, what will this mean to your ministry?” Instead of keeping theologians like Schleiermacher and Tillich at arms length, looking at them under an academic microscope, we were asked how Schleiermacher's ideas might be reflected in today's church, how Tillich's thought shaped American religion and what that might mean to the parishioners in our pews. I remember teachers repeatedly saying things to us, like, “That's a good insight – so how will that be relevant to you in the parish when a parishioner comes to you in tears over her son's drug addiction?” or some thing like that.

My experience of the style difference between these two schools came to mind when I read today's gospel. Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” They answer, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” And I can imagine them debating these answers for a while, weighing each response against the other, as the theologians at Harvard do. A conversation like that could go on for a lifetime! But Jesus cuts to the heart of the issue. He asks, “But who do YOU say that I am?” Perhaps there was a long, awkward silence in the room until finally, Peter, the founder of the church, stands up and speaks from his own heart. “I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” I can just feel his vulnerability as he stands up in front of everyone and make a public declaration of his faith, can't you? Peter knew that thinking about ideas of faith and observing other peoples faith are not the same thing as having faith. And God gave him the ability to stand up and answer the question, “What do I really believe? Who is this Jesus to me and what difference does it make in my life?”

Paul's letter to the Romans also suggests that faith is not something you can figure out by just observing, weighing and thinking about it. He urges his readers to present their very selves to God as a living sacrifice that is holy and acceptable to God – offering the worship of both mind *and* heart – so as to be *transformed* by God and given the ability to discern the good and acceptable and perfect will of God for them.

Paul warns his readers not to think too much of themselves and their ability to figure God out. Reflect with the measure of faith God has dealt to you, he tells them. God has given each of us the measure of faith we need to do the thing we are each called by God to do, whether that is ministering, prophesying, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading or being compassionate. With humility, we know we will never be perfect. But we can trust that God's

perfect purpose for each of us will be revealed to us through our heartfelt offering of ourselves – our souls, minds and bodies – to God.

Well, all this talk of presenting our very selves as a living sacrifice, in holiness, for transformation certainly sounds like something more than just observing faith from arm's length – more than just a passive faith. It's about something much, much juicier. An active faith is less like a specimen in a jar than like the very air we breathe. It is all around us, enters us and becomes a part of us. It saturates us – growing us, healing us, nourishing us, forming us – even giving us new life. In an active faith, God is as close to us as our own cells. And Jesus invites us – the cells of his very body – to actively discover who we really believe he is to us. With his question to Peter, “Who do you say that I am,” he invites all of us to enter into a relationship with him, opening our very selves, so that we can, like Peter, speak our deepest truth confidently before God.

This is the very journey that our confirmation students will take this year. They will learn not just about what the prayer book says or the Episcopal Church says or the priest says and be asked to analyze, compare or memorize them. Instead, they'll be asked what all those things mean to them in their lives right now. They'll be invited to deconstruct and unpack everything they feel others have told them they should believe, and then they'll pick up the pieces to put together an articulation of what they truly do believe as Christians. When they, like Peter, stand before us all next May right here in this church to publicly articulate their own statements of faith, we will witness the tremendous power such testimony can have. We will witness the difference between passive and active faith.

Jesus asks, “Who do YOU say that I am?” And as his disciples, we are all called to answer that question over and over and over again throughout our lives Who do you say Jesus is? God is? The Spirit is? What purpose is God calling you to? Answer those questions in your heart right now. Do you have meaningful, life changing, ministry-feeding answers? Or is your reply more of a pat answer you learned long ago, vague and unclear even to you? Do you look to what others say about God to answer the question, or are your answers pouring out of your own transformed heart? Who *do* you say he is? If you can't honestly say you know, or even if you can but just want to remain on the journey of transformation, now's the time to make your faith more active. Pick up the Bible and read a little bit every day. Come to church and share in the communion feast often. Avail yourselves of the many formation opportunities that are being offered to everyone of every age this coming church year. And pray. Present yourself humbly to God as a living sacrifice in the desire to have your mind and heart transformed. For it was on the rock of a confident, growing and active faith that Christ built the church.