

Sunday, August 21, 2005

Matthew 16: 13-20

Sermon preached by The Rev. Andrea Martin

Who Do You Say that I Am?

If, like me, you are a fan of Christian writer, C.S. Lewis, then you may know that a movie version of his children's book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, is slated to open in theatres this December. The main characters are four children – brothers and sisters. While visiting their uncle and exploring his rambling country estate, the four children stumble upon a secret passageway which leads – unbelievably – to a magical land called Narnia. Narnia is a place where animals speak, and where it is winter all the time.

The four children – Peter, Susan, Lucy, and Edmund – hear about Aslan -- a lion, the good king of the forest, and the Christ figure in the story. The plot centers on the children's journey through Narnia in search of him. On their way, they hear a lot of rumors about Aslan. Mostly good things. The forest animals tell the children that when he returns to Narnia, all wrongs will be righted, and spring will return. But they hear some frightful tales, as well. Things like: Aslan has been gone so long, he may never come back. And maybe he's not as good and powerful as some say; maybe he won't be able to -- or won't want to -- end the eternal winter. As the children trek through Narnia, they discuss all these things, and each has a different opinion about who Aslan is. It's not until they actually find Aslan and *meet* him face to face that these questions begin to be settled. While they were strangers to Aslan, their speculation only took them so far.

The same principle held true for the people who lived when Jesus was preaching and teaching. Like the children who wonder about Aslan, they wondered about Jesus. Skeptics stood at a distance, talking among themselves about who this Jesus might be – a blasphemer, a prophet, *a loon?* Peter, on the other hand -- and the others who risked much by following Jesus – did *not* stand back. They knew him in unguarded moments. They traveled with him, shared meals, laughed, and relaxed. After Jesus died, it was his friends who had known him as a person who concluded he really was much more than that. They didn't need logical convincing or scientific proof that Jesus was the Son of God, because their *experience* of him told them everything they needed to know.

Jesus, you may notice, does *not* commend Peter for the *content* of his confession (*You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God*) but for *how* he arrives at this understanding of Jesus (*for flesh and blood have not revealed this to you*). Jesus, in essence, is slapping him on the back, crying, *Blessed are you*, because Peter is not merely parroting something he has heard others say. Nor is he reciting something he's learned at Temple. Peter is speaking from experience. He is speaking what he knows in his bones to be true about his friend, this Jesus of Nazareth. What Jesus is commending is Peter's investment in him as a person, as a friend.

Maybe Jesus' question *Who do you say that I am* is not one that has kept you up nights. Maybe you've never deliberately set your mind to it. Nevertheless, answers to that question – many of them at odds with each other -- swirl about in public and private discourse.

Our parents – explicitly or implicitly – conveyed to us what they thought of Jesus. The Church offers its answers. (Just think of the Creed, or our baptismal liturgy that makes

a lot of statements about who Jesus is.) Biblical scholars from research universities try to uncover the historical Jesus (telling us what they think Jesus really said, versus the things he probably didn't say, speculating about what he *really* did, versus what he probably did not do). Then there are the answers put forth by pop culture and the media. These can be the most interesting. Books like the *Da Vinci Code*, movies like *Saved*, public figures like George Bush, U2, Mel Gibson -- *all* have something to say about Jesus and who he is.

These answers *from others* – if they are our *only* answers – keep Jesus an idea, a mere abstraction. No wonder so many people ask themselves what do Jesus and the Church have to do with *me!*

And that's not a self-centered question. I will tell you that frankly, *I* am not interested in knowing a god who doesn't want to know *me*.

But as Episcopalians, we're afraid of admitting any self-concern; we're afraid of being tacky. We like to adhere to Emily Post's rules for etiquette even – maybe especially – in church. And that means not attracting attention to ourselves. It means paying -- or at least feigning -- little regard for oneself. Many of us, for example, feel guilty praying for something we want. And similarly, many of us have grown up with the sense that faith should be limited to what is well-mannered and restrained. Instead of really knowing Jesus, we settle for knowing *about* Jesus. In the Episcopal Church, we used to give written tests to teenagers before they could be confirmed, asking them to recall historical details of Jesus' life and recite parts of our catechism, as if knowing facts signaled the completion of our spiritual growth.

That's the common understanding. That was my *own* understanding until fairly recently. Until I found myself sitting across from the Bishop of Massachusetts in an interview for ordination, and the very first question he asked me was this, I'm not kidding: *Tell me, Andrea, about your personal relationship with Jesus Christ.*

Talk about being a deer in the headlights! After what felt like minutes, I managed a response, but for the life of me, I cannot remember what. I found out from talking to others, it was the one question he asked all of us.

I don't think I was accepted into the ordination process for my answer to that question. But it is the *only* question I remember from an entire weekend of interviews. It is the question to which I return again and again. And it's what's convinced me that personal relationship with Jesus – as messy and tacky as that sounds – is required in order to answer *Jesus'* personal question, *Who do you say that I am?*

If *personal relationship with Jesus* is too much -- if it's a phrase with which you'll never be comfortable – then consider instead the idea of *friendship with God*. Friendship with God, as colloquial as it sounds, is actually an ancient concept put forward by 4th century theologian, Gregory of Nyssa.

Becoming friends with God -- or with anyone for that matter -- necessarily involves the real *you*. True friendship can never be a controlled experiment, conducted outside the experiences and circumstances of one's own life. When we are in a relationship in which we

have the freedom to be truly ourselves (which we have with God, because it was God who made us who we are), we can bring everything to the table. And suddenly Jesus and the Church have *everything* to do with who we are.

That's what's liberating and wonderful about a *true* friend. Think of your own true friends. We may have acquaintances with whom we have to put up a good front, with whom we have to censor ourselves. But true friends – and if anyone can be a *true* friend, God can – make space for who we are -- the good, the bad, and the ugly. True friendship means both people are in the relationship, not for what the other can do for them, but for the pure enjoyment of being together.

So, for starters, friendship with God means the freedom to bring *all* our concerns to God, without worrying which concerns are “right” and “good”. I've heard so many people say they don't feel they have the right to pray for something in their lives, because it seems so trifling in comparison to the needs of others. God isn't doing that calculus, though.

So if you're a student and you're worried about college applications, and you're really hoping for one college in particular, God wants to hear about that. Because God is interested in *you*. It doesn't mean you'll get into that college (and again, friendship with God means being interested in God, and not just in what God can do for you), but it does allow God to respond in some way. It does mean that *you* might be changed in the process of working out that problem through with God.

The idea of friendship with God opens up interesting, *fun* ideas of what it means to worship and spend time with God. Yes, that friendship can be cultivated through the reading of scripture, prayer, and receiving the sacraments – all important -- but it makes me think friendship with God can mean so much more. It makes me think that in whatever we do that gives us joy, we can be in God's presence – whether that's running, dancing, singing, cooking, reading.

Another wonderful gift friends give us is insight into who *we* are. Peter discovers who *he* is only in relationship to Jesus Christ (*You are Peter*, Jesus says), and we can expect similar discoveries.

Gregory of Nyssa and his contemporaries who advocated friendship with God were struggling with the very question put to us today, *Who is Jesus?* He and others were trying to reconcile how Jesus could be human *and* divine. Their conclusions led to the formulation of our Nicene Creed. Now even though they were grappling with thorny, philosophical questions, and even though they were very logical – scientific – thinkers, their conclusions were not derived in a vacuum. Or from long hours in a library. Their conclusions came from their friendship with Jesus. During that time Gregory wrote, *We regard falling from God's friendship as the only thing dreadful, and we consider becoming God's friend the only thing truly worthwhile.*