

Series: The Words of Jesus in Intimate Conversation

Today: The Question and the Response

Text: Matthew 16:13-21

A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

Sunday, June 28, 2009

First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

A few weeks ago one of our members, Wade Pond, went before the Committee on Preparation for Ministry of the Presbytery of Donegal. The meeting was to determine if he was ready to advance to the candidacy phase of his continuing journey to become ordained as a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the PCUSA.

The responsibility of the committee is to work with men and women who feel called of God to enter full time Christian service by guiding them in their preparation and examining them when they have completed that preparation. The purpose of the meeting with Wade was to determine his sense of call. It is the responsibility of the Committee to be sure that those who seek ordination are emotionally and spiritually healthy enough to withstand the rigors of being a leader in the church; that the call is truly a call from God and not working out personal issues in one's life by seeking sanctuary in the church.

In a few years Wade and Dan Snyder will come before the same committee to be examined on their competency for ministry. They will have completed four years of college, three years of graduate school earning both a Bachelors and a Masters degree in preparation for their ministry. They will have passed five standardized examinations testing them on competency in Bible content, Bible exegesis (interpreting the scriptures understanding both the context and content of the time in which they were written), systematic theology, worship and sacraments, and church polity and government. They will have written countless papers

explaining their positions on the smallest details of faith and life. The final examination is oral, based upon a prepared statement of faith which each candidate must submit to the committee.

Now the committee is made up of both pastors and lay people who have served as an elder. There are orthodox and fundamentalists sitting side by side with those who see themselves as progressive and liberal, and somehow the candidates need to find a way to speak their own understanding of faith in a way that all the members of the committee can hear them.

Having served as chairman of the COPM in three different Presbyteries, I try to warn our candidates that when the oral examination comes, one member of the committee can usually be counted on to be concerned about orthodoxy, and he will speak in his deepest stained glass voice and ask the question, “*Can you explain the blood atonement of Jesus to the committee?*” Or “*What is your view on the inspiration of Holy Scripture?*” There is bound to be a feminist on the committee will usually ask a question about the exclusive use of male language to speak of God in the Bible. A church bureaucrat will usually grill the candidate on his or her understanding of our church’s government or their view of the church as a connectional institution.

However, I remember a day several years ago when the tone of the examination changed. There was a new member on the committee who brought a breath of fresh air. Of each of the candidates who came before us, this elder would ask: “*In the simplest language you can use, would you describe for me your understanding of the work of Jesus Christ in your life?*”

What was so different about this question was its personal nature. He did not want to know what the candidate had studied about Jesus. He didn’t want them to quote what our Book of Confessions or our Book of Order say about Jesus. He wanted them to share their personal experience of who Jesus was for them.

That is a question that all of us can ask today, isn't it? Who is Jesus Christ for you? Right now, right here in this time and place. Not what do other people say about him; not even what does the church say about him; but who is he in your life. This is the question which our scripture lesson raises. It is not just the question to Peter. It is the question to you and to me.

The question was first asked of Peter at a crucial time in the life and ministry of Jesus. Jesus had answered the question for himself about who he was. At his baptism by John he had heard the voice of God calling him *'beloved son.'* He believed that he was indeed the Messiah; the Christ; the chosen one of God to settle once and for all the issue of God's relationship to humanity. He was the flesh and blood expression of God's concern for how we see ourselves; how we relate to others; and how we care for the world which God has given us as stewards.

Jesus was clear about his identity, but many who followed him were not. So when he asked Peter the question about who people believed he was, Peter told him all of the various interpretations that were floating around. Some believed he was only the reincarnation of previous heroes of the Jewish faith. Some believed he was just another John the Baptist who preached against the abuses of Israel's leaders. Some thought he was a prophet like Elijah who would lead Israel to greatness.

The truth is that Jesus was a great man like all these others, but the issue was never his greatness. So he asks a follow up question to Peter. *Who do you say that I am?* And Peter answered without hesitation: *"You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God."*

Who is Jesus Christ for you; right now; today? For some he is merely an historical figure. For others he was a great teacher. Our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters call him a prophet. However, for Peter he was the Christ; God with us now. And if Peter was right, what difference does that make? What if it is true? If Christ is the Messiah, the chosen one of God,

how does that make a difference for the world in which we live and the church that we love? Or how does it make a difference in your own personal life?

Jesus says that Peter's confession of faith is the foundation on which He will build a church. He tells him that this confession that God is with us now changes the way we are to respond to the events of the world in which we live; even if it is difficult to practice. God with us now means we seek to love before we allow hate to shrink our souls. God with us now means we learn how to forgive before we seek revenge.

A few months ago we all got a lesson in how this looks when Cindy Winters was interviewed by Julie Chen of CBS's *Early Show*. Her husband, Fred Winters, the pastor of First Baptist Church in Maryville, Illinois, was shot and killed during a Sunday service by a troubled young man on March 8, 2009. When asked about her husband's alleged killer, Terry Sedlacek, Winters spoke only a message of forgiveness: *I do not have any hatred, or even hard feelings towards him. We have been praying for him. One of the first things that my daughter said to me after this happened was, "You know, I hope that he comes to learn to love Jesus through all of this." We are not angry at all, and we really firmly believe that he can find hope and forgiveness and peace through this, by coming to know Jesus. And we hope that that happens for him.* [source: CBS, "Pastor's Wife Forgives Accused Gunman," www.cbsnews.com (3-16-09)]

How does someone forgive the person who has taken the life of the person they love the most? Surely it must come from a power greater than themselves who spoke words of forgiveness at his own execution: *"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

God with us now might mean that we might see our responsibilities in life are greater than simply providing for our family's needs or amassing our own personal fortune. It means that we see the world through the eyes of the One who created it and join the Creator in bringing

hope to those who are in despair. Perhaps we might begin to empathize with those whom the world would just as soon forget: the homeless of our city; the impoverished of our partner church in Kiambaa; the frail elderly who are alone and isolated; the abused spouse who finds herself and her children homeless. Perhaps we would see their need for dignity and self-respect and stop distancing ourselves from their need because people like that make us uncomfortable. Perhaps we would help them to find the security of God's presence with them by offering our hand of love to them as a fellow pilgrim in the journey of life. It might take some of our time. It might even cost us some of our money, but we might also find more of the presence of Christ as we discover him among the least of these - our brothers and sisters.

I have told this story before, so if it sounds familiar, forgive me. However, I last told it about six years ago, and some of you weren't here then, and many of you may have forgotten it. It's one of Tony Campolo's stories. If you don't know Tony he is a retired Professor of Sociology at Eastern College. He is in his mid-seventies now, but he still keeps a speaking schedule that would wear out a 20-year-old. He tells the story of traveling from Philadelphia to Honolulu for a speaking engagement. Because of the time difference, Tony was wide awake at 2:00 a.m., and he decided to take a walk. He found a diner open near Waikiki Beach, and he went in for a cup of coffee.

At about 3:00 a.m. the place began to fill up with "women of the evening" all of whom are provocatively dressed, to say the least, and talking crudely. He overheard a conversation between two of the prostitutes. "Tomorrow's my birthday," one of them said. "I am going to be 39." The other one responded, "So what do you want from me, a party? You want me to sing you Happy Birthday and bake you a cake?" "Nah, but why do you have to be so mean. I don't expect a party. I never had one before, so why should I have one now?"

When Tony heard that, he made a decision. He said to himself, “everyone deserves at least one birthday party in their life. So he went to the owner of the place and said, “Do you know that woman over there?”

And the owner said, “Sure. That’s Maggie. Everyone knows Maggie.”

“Well, did you know that tomorrow is Maggie’s birthday and she has never had a birthday party? What do you say we give that woman a birthday party? I’ll treat.” The owner thought it was a great idea and volunteered to bake the cake. Tony got the decorations and the next night they outfitted the diner with streamers and a big sign that said, “Happy Birthday, Maggie.” When Maggie came in about 3:30 in the morning, they all shouted, “Surprise! Happy Birthday, Maggie!” and they sang her the birthday song.

Well Maggie’s mouth fell open and tears welled up in her eyes. When the birthday cake came out complete with candles, she openly cried. When they urged her to cut the cake, she said, “Look, if it’s all right with you....I mean, is it O.K. if I keep the cake for a while; if we don’t eat it right away?” She wanted to take the cake home with her. So the owner of the diner gave everyone pie with their coffee, and Maggie kept the cake. Tony says she took that cake down the street a few doors carrying it like a ring on a pillow.

When all the women had left, Tony said he wasn’t sure what to do. He said to the owner of the diner, “We did a good thing here tonight,” and on the spur of the moment said, “What do you say we pray?” He prayed for Maggie, for her salvation, and for her life to be changed, and for God’s goodness to touch her. When he finished, the owner of the diner leaned over the counter and said with a bit of anger, “Hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to, anyway?”

Tony says it was one of those moments when the right words came out. He said, “I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning. And the owner hesitated for a moment and said, “No way. There is no church like that in Honolulu. If there were, I’d join it. I’d join a church like that!”

Wouldn’t we all want to be part of a church like that; where we experienced the Messiah, the Son of the Living God with us in human form? That is our calling here at First Presbyterian: Discovering the Heart of Christ in the Heart of the City. I pray that we will have the courage to both see him in the faces of those who have the greatest need, and to respond to him with the same love he has shown us.