

Who Are You?

by

James L. Carter

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

Readings: I Peter 2:2-10

May 22, 2011

So many images come to mind when I think of the life-long task we are engaged in having to do with our identity, just exactly who we are. It is a task involving the articulation of our individual identity as well as the definition of our community identity. Who are you? And, who are you, family, church, community of which we are members? What kind of dialogue is there between those several entities?

Today we welcome Kellen Smith to our services and look forward to getting to know him better. We know it will take more than one morning to accomplish that and so keep our anticipation and excitement within bounds for now. This reminds me of a time when Will Rogers was serving as Honorary Mayor of Beverly Hills on the occasion of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's visit to that California community during the 1932 presidential campaign. They were already acquainted and considered themselves friends. Will was at the peak of his career as a

Hollywood star: the highest paid actor of his time, a daily columnist in the New York Times, an aviation enthusiast and an unofficial ambassador to the world. He introduced FDR at this outdoor gathering by saying, “Now Franklin (if I may call you Franklin), we welcome you to Beverly Hills. I am not going to spend a lot of time on a speech for a mere candidate. But if you get elected President, come back and I’ll make a proper introduction.”

So Kellen, the same goes for you. If you get yourself elected today to the office for which you have been nominated, we’ll knock ourselves out getting to know you better and seeking to support you and your calling. We want to know *who you are* and we want you to know *who we are* as a community in mission, the church.

II

I am told that there is a resurgence of interest in one of the great films of the 20th century, director Sir David Lean’s film, *Lawrence of Arabia*. Perhaps this renewed interest is due to the recent happenings and revolutionary moves on the Arabian Peninsula, as well as across Northern Africa. Lawrence was an enigma to many in his day, including himself, and such puzzling people continue to intrigue us long after they are gone.

There are many memorable scenes in this grand film but one which speaks to our theme today occurs as T. E. Lawrence, a British Army officer, and a young Arab man he has befriended, make their way toward Cairo and British Army headquarters there to announce to

General Allenby that they have taken Aqaba. We see them upon windblown sand dunes looking across the Suez Canal, a sure sign that they have returned to civilization. On the other side a lone motorcycle rider in a British Army uniform sees them and stops to call out across the canal: **“Who are you? Who *are* you?”**

It is our question of the day also. It was the world’s question of T. E. Lawrence and it was the question David Lean was attempting to answer about this enigma of a man that Lowell Thomas had made known to the world. (By the way, I have read in an account of the making of that film that the voice of the rider on the motorcycle was none other than that of David Lean himself). It was the world’s question. It was T. E. Lawrence’s question of himself.

III

Our text today, from the first letter of Peter takes a stab at answering this same question which was on the minds of the people of the early church. They were in the early days of determining who they were in the sight of God, in the sight of the world and in their own vision. The writer gives them all the help he can bring to the conversation saying, rather poetically, “Once you were no people, now you are God’s people.” Once you were nobody, now you are somebody. Once you questioned your purpose, now you serve God’s purpose. Once you were adrift, now you have direction. Once you were silent, now you have found your voice. Once you were without mercy, now you have received mercy. The covenant with Israel that had been broken (cf. Hosea, etc.) has been restored.

The early church is described as a holy priesthood, a chosen people (a clear reference and comparison to the people of Israel), a living temple. Among these several descriptions for the community of God's people it is the one which calls them God's chosen people, God's elect that seems as fresh and applicable today as it did when first written. Think of it, we are called "the people of God", the ones God loves, the ones God calls, the ones God counts on. If we don't do it, the job doesn't get done. "Whom will I send?" is the question of the Lord of life, often voiced by the prophets. And down through the ages rings the resounding reply, "Here am I, send me." That can only be declared by a candidate who knows his or her identity: "I am one of God's elect. I am one on whom God is depending. I am one who is prepared to serve."

But I don't want us to focus only on the individual's response to God's call to service. The call is to the community as well. And the community of God's people has a corporate purpose that defines them and gives answer to the world's question, "Who are you?"

IV

You and I have been around long enough to know that the answer to the question of the church's identity is found in the words of Jesus. We are told we are a light to the nations, representatives of God's love for the world, a people with a mission. In fact, as is often said in this community of faith, Bryn Mawr, it is our mission that defines us. Mission is what we are all about. Our worship, our learning, our giving, our caring are reflections of that mission which is given to us by God: Love the world's people as I have loved you, my people.

Do you hear it afresh? Do you hear it, perhaps, as though for the first time? Some of us will hear something new while others will welcome this declaration as a reminder of what they have known and believed for some time. Everything we are; everything we say; everything we do originates with this identity as the chosen people of God. Not chosen for privilege but chosen for service. We are a people with portfolio and miles to walk before we sleep.

From time to time churches like this one write mission statements. (We use a different section of ours each year to provide a theme for the year). They can be useful documents for congregations as we seek to say, concisely, who and what we are. But a good one is very difficult to write. A man named Allan Cox assisted Fourth Presbyterian Church, in Chicago, to write a new mission statement several years ago. He only had one rule. It could not be more than 75 words long. The pastor of Fourth Church, John Buchanan, says it was a big challenge but they met it. “It was not unpleasant he reports. In fact, it was fun. It gave the church leadership a sense of ownership and then pride: pride in their church and humble gratitude for the privilege of being the church of Jesus Christ...and ambassadors of God’s love in Christ’s name.”¹

Here is their best effort at that time to say who they are:

We are a light in the city

reflecting the inclusive love of God.

Comforted and challenged by the Gospel of Christ,

we strive to be a welcoming, serving community.

¹ John M. Buchanan, *Being Church; Becoming Community* (Louisville, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996) p.36.

*At the intersection of faith and life,
we share God's grace
through worship, preaching, education
and ministries of healing, reconciliation and justice.*

*We affirm the worth of all
and nurture each individual's spiritual pilgrimage.*

*Inspired by our heritage,
we confront our future with hope
and confidence in God's people.²*

Telling the world who we are is not always something we do this well. We often assume that the world knows who we are and needs no further definition. And then a friend in New England with relatively little formal church orientation happens to call on the phone and our assumptions are dashed.

It seems that he and his wife are invited to spend Easter weekend with some friends who want them to meet a couple who are currently interviewing suppliers for a building they have under construction.

Our friend wanted a few pointers on what to expect at the luncheon for about forty people that was to follow their attendance at an Easter service. In the course of the conversation he asked Marty, almost

² Ibid.

as a pupil would ask a teacher, “Are Episcopalians Christian?” She gave the appropriate answer with, I will say, pastoral sensitivity.

Later our friend called to tell us about the weekend. They got the big contract with relative ease. But that was not what had impressed him. What he wanted to tell us was that he could not remember the last time he and his wife were with such a community of people who obviously cared about one another and were genuinely interested in one another as those people at the brunch and at the church did.

Our text is a reminder that we have a glorious and precious identity that we dare not ignore. We are called to share that identity and our mission with the world that is so hungry for direction by example.