
Who Do You Think You Are Anyway?

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In the name of God, our Creator, Redeemer, Defender, and Friend! Amen.

[Jesus said] I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. (John 15.15)

So servants don't know the full story of what their master is doing, Jesus says in today's gospel. But to be a friend is to be "in the know.

I had a variation of this teaching happen to me just a week ago, as we were finishing up the spring semester of classes at Emory. Like many revelations I did not realize it was happening at the time. Only now, a week later, have I been able to look back and see clearly that, "Oh yes; this is the kind of thing Jesus was talking about in that passage of scripture to be read in church next Sunday.' Now how convenient! An illustration of this scripture has actually happened in my own life, and I'm also assigned to be the preacher for that very same passage of scripture next Sunday!

I was also helped to connect this scripture to my own experience by a clergy colleague who was complaining to me later in the week. It seems he continues to be discounted and belittled, and generally "dissed' or disrespected, by the teacher who has had the most influence in his life. That teacher repeatedly talks down to him as if he's still only a student and not a clergyman in his own right. It's humiliating, he told me, never being granted the dignity and respect of being a peer to your teacher but always a pupil only.

No matter how much he matures and excels in leading his own congregation it is never enough for his teacher to be able to say something like, "Well done! You've come a long way. Tell me what you're thinking about nowadays. You've learned so much from me. Now I'd like us to consider ourselves colleagues even if I'll always be your senior colleague.'

My clergy friend yearns to hear his teacher say something like that. But now after listening to him, and having immersed myself in today's scriptures this past week, I realize that I'm prepared to say something nearly like that to one of my own students.

Rachel and I were presenting at a forum last weekend on truth and reconciliation commissions. As some of you know, I'm chaplain to our Community of the Cross of Nails chapter here at the Cathedral. The Community of the Cross of Nails that's "C-C-N' not CNN!" is a historically Anglican reconciliation order, now international, that was founded after WWII at Coventry Cathedral in England. Once every quarter our Cathedral CCN chapter offers Cathedral members and friends a Reconciliation Eucharist in St. Mary's Chapel here.

Related to CCN, but in a secular vein, I'm quite active in a social justice nonprofit called Southern Truth and Reconciliation or "STAR." We specialize in promoting truth-and-reconciliation commissions like the one made famous in South Africa by former President Nelson Mandela, and chaired by our Anglican Bishop, Desmond Tutu.

Well, last week my student Rachel who was an intern with STAR this year joined me in presenting at a forum on truth commissions. After we presented our talk one of the participants asked, "What kind of truth-and-reconciliation approach is best at not polarizing a community into two camps? What could my group do to bring people together across the political divisions that keep us antagonized by one another?"

"Story board; no, Story Corps," I replied. I was having a momentary loss of memory, even though I had prepared Rachel as my co-presenter to research Story Corps in advance of the forum. And so I turned to her and asked her to explain what is Story Corps corps, that's 'c-o-r-p-s,' as in 'Marine Corps' or esprits de corps. "Tell us, what is Story Corps," I asked, "and how might it answer the question." And after a few sentences, as Rachel began to speak I realized that I could relax now and let her continue an excellent description of how Story Corps records people's personal stories and oral histories, and broadcasts some of them on NPR National Public Radio.

With pride and admiration I sat back and listened to her explain how personal stories can connect listeners across all social issues, no matter what side of the issue you're on. Instead of polarizing people with arguments, pro and con, people get to offer and hear their own and other people's life struggles and social challenges. It's at that level, often unexpectedly, that they bond with the storyteller in a way that sets the stage for staying connected through the more controversial issues of truth-and-reconciliation.

And now, a week later, I realize that I no longer have simply a student assistant in my social justice work. I've lost a student (she's in fact graduating too)--but I've gained a partner in this truth-and-reconciliation work. For I have shared with her the core teachings of our work, and now she can share those teachings without me being there. It's as Jesus said: "I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (John 15.15).

One of my own teachers tells a humorous story about this kind of shift; the shift from being your teacher's pupil to becoming a friend or a peer. It happened that one of her students suffered a chronic case of low self-esteem. This student try as he might kept feeling powerless and worthless in the face of the challenges that life presented to him.

"I feel like a perpetual loser," he would say. And that was the message that went around and around in his head most all day long. "I'm a loser. I'm a loser. I'm a loser." No variation. No subtle nuance. The same old stupid phrase repeated in the same dull tone.

My teacher then tried the following strategy. She told him that on her own authority she was [quote] "giving him permission to change his life." So she started with something simple; something less challenging and more accessible for him to control, like his work space.

It seems that his co-workers had arranged the office to suit their own preferences without regard to his needs and comfort. "So I give you complete permission," his teacher coached him, "to take back your rightful space in that office." After some weeks of progress on that front she praised him and then graduated to the next challenge. "Now," she said, "I give you complete permission to organize your schedule so that you have more time in your life for rest and recreation, for eating well and for exercising."

Finally after some reasonable progress on that front she decided he was ready for a more formidable challenge. And indeed, a rebirth of self-confidence had already occurred. Based on a month or two of success he was beginning to feel more assertive and assured about managing his life. And so raising the stakes, this time she said, "I give you complete permission to go after your clients who owe you money and collect what they owe you."

But this time, instead of being grateful and agreeing to attempt the new challenge her student said, "What do you mean, "You give me permission. Who do you think you are to give me permission?x#!"

Oh well, maybe there's such a thing as being too successful in therapy!

But let's attend more closely to that intimidating question, "Who do you think you are?" It's the same kind of question that the scriptures are directing at us this morning.

We can hear it most directly in today's reading from the book of Acts. "Who did I think I was?" Peter asks his fellow Jews.

"Who did I think I was to forbid these Gentiles from being baptized into the household of God?"

"Who did I think I was when the Holy Spirit was given to them just as it had been given to us?"

And: "Who was I to deny them water baptism when their Spirit baptism had already occurred under the power of God's own action?"

[Later, Peter] . . . returns to Jerusalem, and defends his actions [to the other apostles. He declares that] . . . God has given the Gentiles "the same gift that he gave us when we believed" (11:17), so who was I to stand in God's way? . . .
[www.montreal.anglican.org/comments/beas6m.shtml]

Yes, who are we to stand in God's way? That's our question as we draw close to the end of this Easter season in our church year. Who do we think we are? "we who have been authorized as the friends of God to represent Jesus and his gospel in the world around us? Who do we think we are, especially as the friends of God, not to be representing Jesus and his gospel in the world around us?"

Pentecost is coming soon, when we commemorate Jesus' sending of the Holy Spirit to be with us and among us, and empowering us to perform godlike works in his name and under his authority. As we prepare for this birthday celebration of the founding of the Christian church, we get to reflect on that question, "'Who do we think we are: called to be friends of Jesus and representing him in the world today?'

Perhaps you've heard a more contemporary version of this question in that famous quotation from Marianne Williamson. It's often misattributed to Nelson Mandela, former President of South Africa, but it's also the kind of thing we would expect him to say in response to the challenging question, "Who do you think you are?"

We ask ourselves, [Marianne Williamson says]"We ask ourselves:] Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? [And then she answers:] Actually, who are you not to be?

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.

You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

--Marianne Williamson, *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles* (Harper Collins, 1992; from Chapter 7, Section 3, pg. 190-191). http://skdesigns.com/internet/articles/quotes/williamson/our_deepest_fear/

With this celebrated quotation many of us have found courage to answer this question with boldness, "'Who do you think you are?' In today's gospel Jesus commands us to assume that boldness as his friends. And this is how he says it: "I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (Jn. 15.15).

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love . . .

"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

You are my friends if you do what I command you . . .

I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. (John 15.9-14, 17)

And so, brothers and sisters, in the name of Christ, our teacher and friend, "I give you complete permission:'

"Love one another!"

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Comments? Contact The Rev. Thee Smith at: TSmith@stphilipscathedral.org