

“Please Don’t Throw the Baby Out With the Bathwater!!”

Spirit of Peace UCC

August 8, 2010

Scripture: Mark 8:

Luke 9:

Matthew 16:

Rev. Jean Morrow

Today’s text is found in Mark, Luke and Matthew. In the scripture, we find Jesus posing the question “Who do you say that I am?” This has been a singularly important question for Christians down through the ages. Depending on how you answer it...how you define who Jesus is...sets up the foundation for how you live your life...it informs your worldview and strongly contributes to how you engage the world.

Who is Jesus to me? He is the one who calls us together...into community...into radical inclusiveness...to look out for one another, courageously, and to love one another...for that is what the kin-dom of God looks like...that is the direction Divine Love is flowing...towards wholeness and a unity that embraces diversity.

But that is only one answer...my quick answer. There are as many answers to that question as there are Christians.

Let us listen together, as Jesus inquires of those who followed him then...and those who follow him now...their understanding of who he is...

Mark 8: 27-29 Follows the Pharisees demanding a sign and the healing of the blind man at Bethsaida, *Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others one of the prophets.” He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”*

Will you pray with me...*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, Gracious God...help us to open ourselves to your love and call into life revealed in the person and presence of Jesus. Amen.*

In 1805 a group of German settlers made their home in a lovely valley in Pennsylvania, just north of Pittsburgh. They were led by Johann George Rapp and together they founded a spiritual community called Harmony. This little group of

refugees were searching for a place where they could worship, farm and put into effect Rapp's communal religious teachings.

The Harmonists were a quiet group, adopting a lifestyle of patience, simplicity, prayer, industry, healthful living and community. There, in that peaceful, unsettled valley, these earnest few constructed a way of life designed to nurture divine harmony between God and humanity...the kind of community that would welcome Jesus into their midst...the kind of community that Jesus would recognize as the kin-dom of God on earth...and he would know he was home.

The Harmonists longed for the wholeness of the universe to be restored, they longed for unity between God and humanity...they longed for health, happiness and peace to be made real. To punctuate this longing, they installed one of the earliest gardens in the country – modeled after their imagined Garden of Eden. For these colonists, harmony meant reordering their community to align with what surely must have been the divine intention all along...a vision that we had strayed from, but that Jesus revealed anew through his life and teachings.

Sadly, the harmonists died out in 1951, no doubt due to their practice of celibacy. But the spirit of their dream...their vision...their optimism and hope for a world of harmony and wholeness lives on...and I would say is re-emerging slowly, but steadily in the Christian church today. We are, I believe, in another great reformation...we are living in a time of transition, but we are definitely living in a time of change in the Christian church. The question for me is how many of us will endure the transition? How many of us will hang in there for the sake of harmony in the name of Jesus?

Last week, I was privileged...by you...to take a study week at my seminary, Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley. I took a one-week class with retired Episcopal priest, Rev. John Shelby Spong...one of my progressive Christian heroes. He invited us to call him "Jack"...he said that's what his friends call him...so from now on I'm going to refer to him as Jack Spong.

I do get star struck by those I consider great thinkers and courageous theologians. I make it my practice to engage them if I can...not in deep theological discussions...although that would be fun...I just want to say that I met them and thanked them for their courage. So I did that during one of our breaks. He was lovely and asked me about my church. So I puffed up my feathers and I told him all about you. His response was wonderful. He said some of the greatest prophetic voices are coming out of the Midwest. He said that people on the coasts too

quickly dismiss or underestimate the work being done in and on behalf of the church in the Midwest. The conversation wasn't long, but it was hopeful and encouraging...got me all fired up again for the courageous and prophetic work we are doing right here to reclaim and reform the Christian church.

But, I've jumped ahead of myself...

On the first day of class, he had us each introduce ourselves so that he would get an idea of the demographics of the class...where we were from, if we were retired or active clergy...how many lay people...how many seminarians...the denominational representation.

My intro was quick. "I am an ordained PSR grad serving a progressive UCC church in Sioux Falls, SD." That 15 word sentence told him plenty about me. Now, one of the things I absolutely love about seminarians is their inability to introduce themselves quickly and easily. Their responses are often quite prolonged...I have a couple of favorites from my class...first, "I am a non-theistic, postmodern Christian engaged in studying Eastern thought"; and not to be out done, "I am a non-theistic, eco-feminist Unitarian Universalist who identifies closely with my Christian roots but am open to the teachings of all the great religious traditions."

Introductions are an interesting study in and of themselves, aren't they? Ask someone who they are and you never know what you are going to get. The various introductions I heard last week provide evidence, I think, that some people, let's call them followers of Jesus, are uncomfortable identifying themselves as Christian. This current reformation we are in has opened up the teachings of Jesus in a way that resonates with many. Jesus points to a God of love and inclusion and justice and compassion that makes sense in our broken world. Yet, many have a difficult time identifying with Christianity during this time of transition and reformation.

Do any of you remember the editorial by Leonard Pitts that was in the Argus on Thursday? The editorial was about author Anne Rice's denouncing of her association with the Christian church. Many of you will remember Rice as the author of the series *The Vampire Chronicles*, the first of which was *Interview with a Vampire*...the book was made into a rather successful Tom Cruise/Brad Pitt movie by the same name. I'm no cultural trend expert, but I think Anne Rice may have been instrumental in kicking off this current vampire frenzy.

What you may not know about Anne Rice is that she was born into a New Orleans Catholic family, and she gave up on religion at age 18, claiming atheism. She moved to the Bay Area and actually lived in the Haight-Ashbury district in the 60s...though she describes herself as a complete conservative. She remarked in an interview that, “while others were dropping acid and getting high on grass, I was sitting in my apartment writing. I’m a total square.” She and her family moved to Berkeley and resided there for many years. She currently lives in the Los Angeles area.

In 1998, after quite publically identifying as an atheist for almost 40 years, she returned to the Catholic Church and claimed quite publically again that she wanted to consecrate her gifts and talents to Christ...and she began a period of intense Biblical study and historical research, which she poured into an intense effort to write novels about the Jesus of scripture, the Jesus of faith and about his vibrant first century world.

On Thursday, July 29th, she declared on her Facebook page, to her adoring public and to the world, “Today, I quit being a Christian.” As you can imagine, this was big news in California.

She went on to say, “I remain committed to Christ as always, but not to being ‘Christian’ or to being a part of Christianity. It’s simply impossible for me to “belong” to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group. For 12 years I have tried. I’ve failed. I’m an outsider. My conscience will allow nothing else. In the name of Christ, I refuse to be anti-gay. I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life.”

In a follow-up interview with the Los Angeles Times she added, “I’ve also found that I can’t find a basis in scripture for a lot of the positions that churches and denominations take today, and I can’t find any basis at all for an anointed, hierarchical priesthood. So all of this finally created a pressure in me, a kind of confusion, a toxic anger at times, and I felt I had to step aside. And that’s what I have done.”

Unfortunately, she did what so many frustrated Christians do...they throw the baby out with the bathwater. Based on her experiences within the Catholic Church, she denounced all of organized Christianity. She denounced all denominations. I was deeply struck by that...and I find myself getting defensive for myself...for my, albeit, small denomination...and for every small congregation who is attempting to

live into a vision of harmony and wholeness and radical inclusion that is so much a part of the life and teachings of Jesus.

I am happy to say that the UCC offered a response to Rice. Our General Minister, Geoffrey A. Black remarked that her commitment to following Christ with authenticity is admirable and reflects the faith journey taken by many who have found a spiritual home in the UCC. He went on to say, “Too often we have confused following Christ with defending the institutional church, and we have unnecessarily insisted that we must be of one mind, instead of one heart. Hopefully, declarations such as Anne’s will challenge and alter our definitions of Christian discipleship and, in the process, change the church itself. I, along with many in the UCC, share Anne Rice’s commitment to a faith that affirms life in its fullness and diversity...and does not deny its beautiful and sometimes complex realities.”

The UCC also launched a public campaign on Facebook called “You’d Like the UCC, Anne Rice” to offer her support and to introduce her and others to the denomination. I checked late yesterday and she hadn’t responded on Facebook to the campaign.

She needs to do what she needs to do...I, too, respect that she needs to find a way to live her faith with authenticity. And, I sincerely hope she at least looks into what the United Church of Christ is trying desperately to be about...a justice seeking gathering of God’s people who are daily challenging themselves to practice radical hospitality, inclusion and compassion. But, for me, she is representative of lots of people who have given up on the Christianity and the church.

My new friend Jack ended each class with Q & A...and one brave attendee, a seminarian, no doubt, asked him why he still called himself a Christian. He gave a two part answer. First of all, he said it is the faith of his birth and his life, one he knows inside and out and deeply...and he says the message of God, revealed through Jesus, is that we should live fully, love wastefully and be all that we can be...that our lives should enhance the love that’s available in this world...and that is a message...an understanding of who Jesus is...that makes sense to him. He also said that he wants to use his public persona to give hope to Christians like you and me...to trust the God we know through the Jesus we know...and to not give up on the harmony the Divine Spirit of love is longing for.

Which makes me think once again of his words to me personally...some of the greatest prophetic voices are coming out of the Midwest.

We are doing important work here in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. One of the most important things we may be doing is providing a safe place for tired, disenchanted Christians to regroup, ask their important faith questions...out loud...and rediscover the world saving teachings of Jesus about a God who loves all of creation...every creature...every thing...and longs for us to be at peace with one another...true peace...true shalom.

My friends, with one slight difference...that whole celibacy thing...we are much like the Harmonists of the early 1800s. We have established this congregation...this church...so that other Christian refugees who hold a vision of reconciliation, wholeness and peace might find a home here. Like our colonial ancestors, we too want to learn a way of life designed to nurture harmony...the kind of community that would welcome Jesus into our midst...the kind of community that Jesus would recognize as the kin-dom of God...the kind of community that Jesus would call home. May God bless the important work we are doing here, together, and may we be called even deeper into living fully, loving wastefully and being all that we can be. May it be so for you and for me. Amen.