



Round Hill Community Church

Sermon: January 10, 2010

Who Are We in the Sight of God?, Robert B. Culp

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

There is an old Hebrew story of a rabbi who was living in a Russian city many years ago. Disappointed by his life's lack of direction and sense of purpose, he wandered out into the chilly evening. With his hands thrust deep into his pockets, he walked through the empty streets, wondering about his own faith and his calling as a rabbi. He was so enshrouded by his own despair that he mistakenly walked into a Russian military complex that was off-limits to civilians.

Suddenly, the silence of the evening was shattered by the loud bark of a Russian soldier: "Who are you? And what are you doing here?" The rabbi replied, "Excuse me?" "I said, 'Who are you? And what are you doing here?!'" After a brief moment, the rabbi, in a gracious tone in order not to provoke the soldier, said, "How much do you get paid every day?" The soldier responded, "What does that have to do with you?" The rabbi replied, "I will pay you the same sum if you will ask me those same two questions every day for the rest of my life: Who are you? And what are you doing here?"

It seems to me that a well-lived life keeps those very questions of identity and purpose front and center. But to know who we are, to be clear about our identity, can be a real struggle for us especially within our modern culture with all its conflicting claims and confusion of names. Somehow, we are forever answering to some false name, hiding behind some false sense of self, and forever misunderstanding who we are ... and by whom we are called and given our true identity. And the messages we receive on a daily basis lead us all over the map of human existence and daily strivings:

"You are mostly a sexual being ... the movies and soap operas and songs tell us, lusting and being lusted after. Your body is your most important possession ... so nurture it, love it, display it, show it off."

"You are mostly a brain, a rational and thinking and reasoning being, absorbing facts and figures, going to school, bowing down before the temples of Athena, living only to learn and not learning really how to live. It's not who you are that counts, but what you know."

"You are mostly a maker and spender of money, capitalist, doer, producer, obtainer of cars and properties, portfolios and toys of all shapes and sizes ... the advertisers and peddlers tell us."

"And this modern, secular world tells us, 'You are a self-centered, autonomous, self-made being. Nobody is going to look out for you but yourself. You are the most important project in your life. Look out for number one. Soothe, satisfy, make happy, thrill, and entertain your adorable lonely little 'you.'"

The truth is that the question of "Who am I?" is not fully answered in our early adolescence, nor by the age of 21; nor is it completely settled by the age of 40 or 50 or 60 or beyond! All through our lives, we still ask the question of who we are – experimenting with our lives,

mixing in this and that and testing our limits, hoping that some day the whole thing will jell and come together. Like Proteus, the figure of Greek mythology who could change his shape at will, we continually change our shapes according to varying circumstances to suit the situations, going through endless Protean transitions as each new day demands. In many respects, we are always “under construction” as human beings – growing, developing, evolving into the best self that we can be.

Now, if this is true of individuals, it is also true of communities of faith. And as a congregation, especially in a time of transition, we would do well to keep the questions ever before us of who we are and what we are doing here.

When Peter Drucker, the famous management consultant, would begin his work with an organization, he would ask two related and deceptively simple questions. Drucker’s first question always would be: “What kind of business are you in?” The second question was this: “How’s business?” Such questions force an organization to ponder carefully and then to articulate clearly what it understands its true mission to be. But many organizations, including a number of churches, don’t really know what business they are in, or perhaps they have forgotten it. And if you are not clear about what kind of business you’re in or don’t know what it is, how can you do it and how can you know if you’ve done it? Even more, how can you possibly know the ways in which you can do it better?

The thing is that if we don’t remember what kind of business we are in as a family of faith, we can get caught up in all sorts of extraneous matters and tangential pursuits ... worthwhile endeavors, perhaps, and noble pursuits – but endeavors and pursuits that can be depleting, and that are not essential to who we are and what we need to be about as God’s people in this time and place.

There is a brewery in the Pacific Northwest that has a slogan: “The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing.” Now, if that is an important reminder for a brewery, how much more important it is for a church!

Back in 1998, anticipating the retirement of Ralph Ahlberg, Marshall Clark (who was then the Chairman of the Board of Trustees) encouraged the church’s leadership to develop a new Mission Statement to guide the congregation into a new future. A small group drafted an initial statement, several congregational forums were held after worship for the input and consideration of all members, and ultimately the congregation came to affirm the statement that is printed in this morning’s bulletin.

That Mission Statement, coupled with the recent survey of congregational members, reveals our self-understanding as a non-denominational, independent church body. It also identifies key values that are ours ...

- * as a community of faith that attends the needs of its members and the world in ways by which wounds are healed, dividing walls are torn down, justice and peace are pursued, fellowship is fostered, and love is demonstrated and celebrated in our life together;

- * as a community whose worship and music stirs the soul, inspires the heart, and stimulates the mind of each one who enters this sanctuary and seeks to worship the Lord in Spirit and in Truth;

- * as a community where we are “growing disciples of our Lord,” which I mean in a double sense ... not only our nurturing growth in faith for followers of Jesus of all ages, but also our seeking to grow in our own faith wherever we are on life’s journey.

Indeed, as a community of faith we are open to the enriching insights, the stimulating questions, the honest and personal struggles of all who come through our doors who wish to join with us in a life-long adventure of discovery and growth in the Spirit of the One who is our Lord and God.

Above all, though, we affirm that Jesus is Lord ... that through Jesus’ baptism, which we share with him, we too are God’s beloved and precious children – which means that we belong to this unique body of Christ, that its mission is our own mission, and that we gather around this table and in this sanctuary each week for sustenance and strength to become more fully who we are and to know what we are doing here in this part of God’s wondrous creation.

In Alex Haley's *Roots*, there is a memorable scene concerning the night Kunta Kinte drove his master to a ball at a big plantation house. Kunta Kinte heard the music from inside the house, music from the white folk's dance. He parked the buggy and settled down to wait out the long night of his master's revelry.

While he sat in the buggy, though, he heard other music coming from the slaves' quarters, the little cabins behind the big house. It was different music, music with a very different rhythm. He felt his legs carrying him down the path toward those cabins, where he found a man playing African music, the music he remembered hearing in Africa as a child, the music he had almost forgotten since becoming enslaved. Kunta Kinte discovered that the man was from his section of Africa, and they talked excitedly in their native language of home and the things of home.

That night, after returning from the dance, Kunta Kinte went to his quarters, and he experienced a profound transformation. He lay upon the dirt floor of his little cabin and wept, weeping in sadness that he had almost forgotten, but also weeping in joy that he had at last remembered who he really was. The terrifying, degrading experience of slavery had almost obliterated his memory of who he was. But the music had helped him remember.

Such a story is a baptismal parable of sorts. It's a parable of how easy it is for us, in the midst of this life, to forget who we are and whose we are. But Jesus' own baptism and his table spread before us this morning serve to remind us that we have a Lord who gave his life for us, that Someone greater has named us and claimed us, seeks us and loves us ... so that we may become who we really are and become empowered to embrace the mission that is ours as God's beloved children and family in this very place.

Let us pray: O Lord our God, you have called us into being as your very own. Help us to embrace who we are in your sight, and, sustained by the food you alone provide, remember our mission together, generate new visions and key objectives for the new tomorrows you have in store for this church, and with great love seek to serve you with gladness each new day, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.