

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Fr. Rick, homilist

I am sure some, perhaps many, of us, have been asked by another, “Who do you think you are?” It is a good question, though when being asked, we might not see it that way because the person asking may be a bit belligerent. Bo Donaldson and the Heywoods had a hit song with that title in the 1970s. In 2009, the group Jigsaw released the same song with their own adaptation. The Spice Girls, in 1996, used the same title, with different lyrics. Christina Perri also released a song with that title in 2010, again with different lyrics. You can’t keep a good song title down. It is a good question. Who do you think you are?

Among the various authors of the New Testament writings – gospels, letters, etc. – the one I would like to ask who he thought he was is the Apostle Paul. In his letter to the Christ community in Philippi, he writes of himself regarding his identity before he began as a follower of Christ, “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”

So who was Paul? He was a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, a member of the Pharisee movement, a Roman citizen raised in a Hellenized (Greek) culture, and a disciple of his Resurrected Rabbi, Jesus. We also know Paul as a major apostle who spread the teachings of Jesus, founding Christ communities in Asia Minor and Europe. Many of his letters make up the New Testament.

His letter to the Christ community in Rome has me wondering if the Romans may have asked when they received his letter, “Who does he think he is?” This is a not community he founded; these are a people he did not know. He introduced himself and wrote of plans to visit. Surely, the community heard of Paul and had some idea who he was.

From this voice from outside their community, they hear messages that are pretty direct. “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.” “Be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” “Don’t think of yourself more highly than you ought to think.” “...so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of one another.” “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.”

These messages are key. Being followers of the resurrected Christ, they are part of a group whose beliefs and practices are considered illegal. The Roman Empire tolerated the religions of the peoples they conquered, if the religion was of longstanding tradition such as Judaism. Christianity was a “newbie.” As the Christian movement grew, it did not have a legal status. With the Christian beliefs and practices, many asked, “Who do you think you are?”

Sporadic and local persecutions occurred as this religious movement developed; Emperor Nero’s persecution of the Christians at the time of Rome’s burning in 64 CE is notable. And Rome is the home for this community to whom Paul wrote this letter. The exhortation he gave them could have been a means for them to be empowered against the ugliness ahead.

Rome is also the place where Paul will die. When the Roman followers of Christ faced persecution and the apostle Paul faced death, they may have been asked “Who do you think you are?” Their willingness to face execution exemplified their trust in God and commitment to Christ.

Jesus asks his closest disciples, “Who do others say I am?” as distinct from “Who do you think you are?” They give various answers. Jesus asks, “Who do you think I am?” The first to respond is Peter. Now I ask you, who among us is surprised Peter is first? Were you thinking, John or James? How about the disciple Nathaniel? Recall that when Jesus met Nathaniel, he announced, “Here is a true Israelite in whom there is no deceit?” No, it is Peter. Remember his journey to Jesus walking on the water, successfully at first, until he lost his focus. Peter was the one – never-at-the-loss-for-words Peter. What follows are words that have been debated over for centuries regarding Peter and the church. And the debate continues – but not with us today.

Jesus gives his disciples an understanding of who they are becoming, and what empowerment is theirs. They, as the first assembly of disciples of Jesus, will set the standard of what following Christ is: the ability to not be defeated by anything that opposes what Jesus is teaching and giving, the witness of a trust in God not weakened by questions nor doubts but strengthened by both, and the understanding that if one loses one’s way, the Spirit of God remains present to help. Who do you think you are, disciples? This is only one set of your answers.

Now the question is for us. Who do we think we are? Each of us must answer for ourselves. It is a question to which we must give thought and not feel pressured to respond. Peter answered quickly who he thought Jesus was, but the fisherman may have had more pause to his reply if Jesus had asked him who Peter thought Peter was. It is a good question on which to reflect.

Follower of Christ, who do you think you are? Just as there could be any number of responses to Jesus’ first disciples’ replies, so could it be for us today. Among them could be: I am a child of God and all others are children of God, I trust in the God revealed through the teachings and example of Jesus – a God who loves; I am not threatened by questions or doubts but see them as invitations to look more deeply; and I care for all that God has brought into being, especially this world with all its beauty.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a 20th century German Lutheran pastor, theologian, anti-Nazi dissident and key founding member of the German Confessing Church identified by its opposition to Nazism, sees a follower of Christ as someone who says yes to God. In saying yes to God, Bonhoeffer says it also means saying no to other things. I quote the revered pastor and theologian, “Your ‘yes’ to God requires your ‘no’ to all injustice, to all evil, to all lies, to all oppression and violation of the weak and poor.”

You can’t keep a good question down, so this question is for us, who do you think we are? Amen!