

2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19
 Ps. 24
 Mk. 6:14-29

Proper 10
 Eph. 1:3-14
 St. Barnabas

Have you ever played with the book series *Where's Waldo?* "Lost for thousands of years, hidden among thousands of people," Waldo is a cartoon character whose identity is sought in thousands of places by people across the globe. This poor fellow's identity is obscured by all the details of the contexts in which he is hidden, and he's not easy to find!

The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have played where's Waldo with Christians for at least the last twenty-five years. Their writers have suggested in myriad ways that the identity of Christian churches has been lost, obscured by their surroundings, that we have no identity that differs significantly from purely secular social service agencies. I quote: "Flexible to the point of indifference on dogma, willing to blend Christianity with other faiths, eager to downplay theology entirely in favor of secular political causes....What should be wished for is that liberal Christianity recovers a religious reason for its own existence."¹

Perhaps because historically more members of Congress and the White House belonged to the Episcopal Church than any other denomination and the National Cathedral is an Episcopal Church, the newspapers pay particular attention to the Episcopal Church's identity. Just last Sunday the *New York Times* contained an article about the Washington National Cathedral entitled "Storied Cathedral's List of Repairs: Finials, Finances and Faith." In that article the dean of the Cathedral is quoted as saying, "The culture that produced mainline Christianity is giving way to a new culture, and we need to figure out how to align ourselves with that culture." Given the title of the article, one could interpret the Dean's remarks to mean that our faith needs to be "repaired" in order to align with the new culture. Is that what the Dean meant or what the reporter wanted to imply? Do we need to alter the words of our faith, refine, or redefine the substance of our faith itself? What is our identity? Who is Christ Jesus to us, those called by His name "Christians"?

The powerful in the land asked the same question in this morning's gospel: Who is Jesus? "He is John the baptizer, raised from the dead," they said, "and for this reason these powers are at work in him." But others said, "It is Elijah." And others said, "It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old." The questions reverberate off the walls of the villages: Who is this guy, anyway? If you or I had been there then, wouldn't we have been asking the same questions? Aren't we asking them now? Who is this man called Jesus?

The gospel according to Mark tells us Jesus has been making His way through the region of the upper Galilee, teaching. His message has drawn crowds, but the tetrarch of Galilee, Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great, does not know what to make of Jesus or his message. Some around him are saying, "John the baptizer has been raised from the dead...others say, It is Elijah. And others say, It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old."

These rumors will be repeated again in a charged environment, specifically that of Caesarea Philippi. Here at Caesarea Philippi is a spring with which numerous miracle stories are associated. The impulse to revere sources of water dates from prehistory. Water, the source of life, connotes a holy place. So at this location Herod the Great, the father of Herod Antipas, had built a magnificent marble temple near the cave and spring dedicated to the nature god Pan. But the Romans worshipped multiple gods, so modern day visitors can still see in the faces of the cliffs of Caesarea Philippi carved niches where

¹ Ross Douthat, "Can Liberal Christianity Be Saved?" *The New York Times*, Sunday, July 15, 2012.

differing idols were placed. In this pluralistic, religiously many-sided landscape the word-for-word questioning of Jesus' identity continues. Here Jesus, surrounded by images of pagan gods, asks his disciples, "Who do men say that I am?" and receives from His disciples [!] the answer that echoes the earlier incomprehension of Herod Antipas: "Some say John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets."²

"Who was Jesus of Nazareth then, to them? Who IS Jesus to us today?" we ask. And the answer is just as provocative now as it was then. We live in a culture that drowns us with countless gods, a culture of modern paganism characterized by the "new pantheon"³: gods of power, gods of economic security, gods of status, gods that flatten out the fact that there are real distinctions to be made between false and true religious beliefs. Pluralism of worship is accepted in our society, which in itself is not a bad thing: Pluralism gives us the freedom to worship without having to do so behind closed doors, and sing loudly if we want to! At pluralism's extreme, freedom from any belief is the new credo saying: There are multiple ways to love, live, and be happy, liberated from old rules. But such freedom can become loss of definition and lack of identity. For example, even though the God of Islam, the God of the Hebrews, and the God of Christians is not the same, we often hear Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faiths conveniently lumped together as the Abrahamic traditions.

Willard Oxtoby argues that a more accurate identification would be to refer to the Jewish, Zoroastrian, Christian, and Islamic traditions as Western religions⁴ and the Hindu, Sikh, Jain, and Buddhist traditions we find in America as Eastern religions.⁵ Perhaps the safest thing to say about religion in America is that what is venerated is our right to worship as we please.

Freedom of religion, while a vital aspect of liberty, is very different from the loss of definition that is occurring in the Church.

It is not because of freedom of religion that our pluralistic secular American culture no longer constructs its questions and answers on the basis of the existence of the God of the Christian Bible. We are responsible. It has often been said that Christianity must be rediscovered in each generation, but our own lack of education about who we are and our failure to pass on the message of what a Triune God means to our children and to our society has made the life of Jesus the Christ somehow more inaccessible to us.

The early Church also struggled with defining the identity of Jesus and His message. In 325 the emperor Constantine I convened a great council at his summer palace on the shores of Lake Nicaea. Present at that council were 200 to 300 bishops, such leaders of the Church as Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria, Hilary of Poitiers, and Cyril of Jerusalem. They were there to debate with Arius of Alexandria the question of whether or not Jesus, the Son of God, was divine. Arius preached that the Logos was God's first creation. "No!" said the council: The Logos, the Word, the Son of God was not a creation of God. The Christ was perpetually eternal with God. The Greek word they used to express this concept meant of one substance with the Father. That word [homoousious], thought the council, should solve the problem. With that word as the centerpiece, they wrote the Nicene Creed and anathematized Arius. But the problem didn't go away. Arianism and its offshoots continued to struggle with the identity of Jesus, some arguing Jesus was LIKE God

² Mark 8:27b-29a.

³ Jennifer M. Ogden.

⁴ *World Religions: Western Traditions*, ed. Willard G. Oxtoby (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁵ *World Religions: Eastern Traditions*, ed. Willard G. Oxtoby (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[homoiousious], others that Christ has no human mind or nature, and others that the Holy Spirit is just a creature. So a second council was called in 381 by the then Emperor Theodosius. This council was held at Constantinople where Arianism was once more condemned, along with a couple other heresies for good measure; and a paragraph on belief in the Holy Spirit was added to the Creed.

Modern pilgrims can go to Iznik in northwestern Turkey, the village the early Church called Nicaea, and see the remains of the building where the first ecumenical council took place. Marble ruins line the edges of the lake that was the site of Constantine's summer palace. Recently when the level of the lake was down, the outlines of an ancient basilica could be seen in the water, a church which has yet to be excavated.

Why should it matter to you and to me what the early Church councils decided? It matters because though we confess the Nicene Creed every Sunday, people still ask, "Who was Jesus?"

There are congregations in this diocese that remove the name of Jesus from their healing services so as not to offend the Buddhists who take communion with them. There are congregations which have asked the bishop for permission to omit the Nicene Creed on Sunday mornings. The Bishop said, "No. And I'll come and teach you why." No doubt on the principle that it's easier to ask forgiveness than permission, there are churches that don't ask but substitute ee Cummings poetry when the Creed is called for. I once asked the rector of the ee Cummings parish why they do not say the creed on Sundays: "That historical, hysterical creed?" he replied.

The creeds arose from the early Church's struggles to understand what Jesus of Nazareth meant for them and for future Christians. What He said and how He manifested God resulted in distinctive practices of Christian worship which, when combined with the scriptures of Israel, expressed something deeper than either of those marks of identity did separately. Every profession of faith through the words of the Nicene and the Apostles Creeds is gleaned from the Bible's critical information and the consensus teaching of the early Church, but the deeper meaning of the creeds is that they offer definition, not just to Jesus' identity but to our identity as Christians. A contemporary illustration of this principle can be found in the 2002 novel *Everything is Illuminated* by Jonathan Safran Foer.

The 2005 movie based on the book tells the story of a young American Jewish boy who collects family memories, much as the Church collects traditions. When his grandfather dies, Jonathan Foer collects his namesake's treasured amber necklace. And when Jonathan's grandmother dies, she leaves to him a star of David and a picture of his grandfather with the young woman who saved him from the Nazis, a young woman around whose neck is pictured the amber necklace. So Jonathan decides to travel to Ukraine to find the woman who saved his grandfather's life.

What he finds instead is the sister of that woman, a sister who---like himself---is a collector of the past. She presents to Jonathan a wedding ring, the wedding ring his grandfather had presented to the woman in the picture, now long dead at the hands of the Nazis. The surviving sister says to Jonathan, "I did not understand why my sister hid her wedding ring in a jar. But she said to me, 'In case.'" Turning to Jonathan, the old woman asks, "Why bury it?"

Jonathan responds, "As proof that she existed?"

"No!" replies the old woman.

"To remember her?"

"No!"

"In case someone came searching one day, so there was something to find?"

"No! It doesn't exist for you. You exist for it. You have come because it exists. The ring is not here because of us. We are here because of the ring."

The creeds are not here because of us. We are here because of the creeds. They are not here because of our needs or our right to substitute ee Cummings poetry for them. We have come here because their truths exist, because the creeds provide us with a testament to the reality of transcendent experience. We have come here to join in the profession of the creeds not to blanket the truth with a din of words but because the creeds profess truths beyond our senses, the unsolved remainder of all we can touch, taste, smell, see, and hear. We exist because of what the creeds tell us: that God the Father is stability, not stability as stasis but stability as Order, Continuity, and Faithfulness; that God the Son is Presence and Promise; that God the Spirit is the fire of mission to glorify God, not maintain an institution of power and control.

Today, this morning, Jesus says to each of us, "When the totals of your plans and of your life's experiences do not balance out evenly, I am the unsolved remainder,⁶ He who remains beyond your experiences. I am the vastness of new life, and I am with you." Hearing that word, on the strength of that promise, you and I can discover new life, His and ours, a life of fathomless possibility...with God.

(The Rev.) Judith M. McDaniel, Ph.D.

⁶ Karl Rahner, *The Eternal Year*, 1964.