“Who Do You Say That You Are?”

The Rev. Lisa J. Durkee

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This is an interesting Sunday for me and it was the case through the week that I kept returning to scripture wanting something fresh and new. What I kept bumping into is on my wall. You probably are familiar with Rob Shetterley’s series of Americans Who Tell the Truth and know that Rob McCall’s portrait is on my office wall. I kept coming back to a sermon I preached many years ago because the question keeps coming back to me: “Who do you say that I am?” And then the response, who do *we* say that we are? I was on sabbatical ten years ago at this time, winding down what was to have been two months of reflection, particularly regarding the ways in which we all turn and then return to faith practices, and sometimes even to our faith. During what was quite a restful summer in which I was reminded more than once that God’s constancy—that God’s omnipresence is sure. What had been at question in the months leading up to my time off is how *I, how we*, identify Jesus, and the ways in which we identify ourselves in response to that understanding. It was just a couple of weeks ago that Derek Van Bever remembered to us Rob McCall’s often quoted statement as he shared it with Rob Shetterly, which I have edited down to its root here: “I don’t care what you say you believe . . . I care who you love.” The scripture lesson from Matthew this morning asks us to consider elements of this question, and in conversation with the passage from Exodus asks us to reflect most closely on who we say that *we* are in response.

The greatest gift of time off in 2013 was a summer trip to China for my girls and me. Keira, who was then 14, and Emma, who was 11, were infants when their dad and I adopted them. Although I had been to China twice, to bring each of the girls home, this trip was difficult. It was hot and extraordinarily humid, and our travels were too constant. I figured with 18 days in China we’d better see as much as we possibly could; 7 trips in-country was probably too much. The food was sometimes beyond description in familiar words, and we can now lay claim to having eaten many more foods on the world’s top 100 list of bizarre items. Well, I can, and not always on purpose, when our guide didn’t know how to say words like “cow stomach” or “frogs,” which are different and more substantive than frog legs. Still, no matter where in the world I have had the opportunity to travel, I have been blessed by the kindness of strangers. I also will always remember from that trip and do from time to time, worshipping with my mom when we traveled together to bring Emma home. Seeing joy in the faces of Christians in the capitol of Guangdong Province reminded me of the hope that faith in Jesus brings. Do you know that it is estimated there are over 155 million Christians in China? That’s hard to get your mind around, isn’t it? There are now more Christians in China than in the United States. Let that sink in.

So, knowing this, and with those memories, I was really surprised at three times this trip when people asked what I did for work. “I’m a minister . . .” No recognition . . . “a pastor . . . of a church” . . . “a priest in a Christian church.” “Oh,” said our guide in Hunan Province, “I knew a Christian once.” “Oh,” said our guide in Beijing, “my mother went to a church once.” It was while in a cab in Wuhan that our young male guide asked, “Do you really believe that this man Jesus was somehow God?”

**15**“But what about you?” [Jesus] asked. “Who do you say I am?”

**16**Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

“Yes,” I told this very articulate young man from the capitol city of Hubei Province, exactly halfway around the world from here. “I believe that God loves us so much that God became one of us, to show us how to live. If we live the way Jesus taught us, there would be peace and joy.”

I spoke without thinking very hard. I think sometimes the greatest clarity comes when we aren’t thinking, or at least that’s true for me and was this week. In a country where the majority of people have never seen a church or known a Christian, my conversation with this man asked that I answer the most important question I have ever been asked. Who do I say that Jesus is? From the conversations with those several people who had never known a Christian or known what church is, even more important in some ways, or maybe altogether, is my reaction or response to that answer. If we say that Jesus is the Messiah, or the Son of the Living God, who do we say that we are as Christians? If our belief in this astounding fact isn’t somehow manifest in our daily life, then we might hear from others a more derisive “*who do you think you are?”* Who do we think we are?

It’s not only in China that the church is an unknown, and Jesus is a guy who lived far away a long time ago. There are now more Christians in China than in the United States. We can find fault with large-scale surveys, but Pew and others name around 43% as completely unchurched in America; that is a growing number. Figures vary, of course, depending on various demographics, but the fact is that there are a lot of people who live around us who might ask us just as innocently as my new friends in China, “what does it mean to go to church?” “What do we mean when we say that we are Christians?”

Can you sing it with me? “And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love. Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love.” I have loved coming the driveway here, coming down the hill and seeing the sign for Simmering Pot—free dinner Monday nights. I love the artwork on the outside of the building just now that invites us to think about the church in new ways and wonder what’s going on inside. I love that our local food pantry, Tree of Life, had its origins in the basement of the church parsonage, likewise with the Turnstyle with cheap and sometimes free clothing for those who need it. It speaks a language more familiar to some than our gorgeous spire that catches the sunlight in a way that warms me as I catch first glimpses. What are some of the other words that our faith in Jesus Christ as Messiah teaches us? What language that we speak of our faith can be translated into any culture? How can we make people understand what it means to say that “I am a Christian?” If all that an “unchurched” person hears of the church is the squabbling between sects and the disparagement of persons different from us, then to be a Christian is not to be saved from much.

And boy do we need saving. And boy, have we always needed saving! In this morning’s passage from Exodus, we have an introduction to God’s power and humanity’s awe. “**7**The Lord said, “I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. **8**So I have come down to rescue them.” Moses’ response to the holy moment of seeing God’s presence in the burning bush might feel pretty familiar. He is afraid, and hides his face. But what if he had stayed that way? There is some telling that needs to happen, and Moses *does* walk down the mountain and share what he has known, but not before he has made sure he knows how to introduce God to the people. I’m reminded of the phrasing of our baptismal liturgy. We ask, somewhat quaintly, “by what name shall this child be called?”

By what name shall this God of ours be called? “I am that I am” is more literally translated as “I will be what I will be.” In either case, there is a kind of certitude and continuity in God’s identity that is both awesome and mysterious. We probably shouldn’t be surprised. In the first church I joined as an adult, I heard a sermon that said we had better be pretty careful when we say “I am.” If that’s God’s name, what follows “I am” in our own statements better be pretty carefully wrought. I was reminded of that this summer, when I had to fill in the blanks when I said to people throughout my travels, “I am a Christian.” Just who am I saying I am? I am a follower of Jesus Christ—hopefully a disciple. Just who do we say that we are?

I had two surprising opportunities for worship that summer of 2013. The first was in Hong Kong, when in passing a lovely Episcopal church at the base of Victoria Peak, I heard familiar chanting. They were holding a service of Taizé worship—styled after the monastic community in eastern France. Sitting in the back pew with my two daughters, I was not the only westerner, but I might have been the only one who knew the words. Most of the people there were tourists like we were, but most intent on looking at the stained glass windows lit by the late afternoon sun. I can’t tell you how happy I was to sing along with words that have held me in various times in my life. “In the Lord I’ll be every thankful. In the Lord, I will rejoice. Trust in God. Do not be afraid. Lift up your voices; the Lord is near. Lift up your voices; the Lord is near.” Yes!

That’s who we say that we are when we say that we are Christians. We know that God has become one of us. We know that Jesus offers us a way back into intimate relationship with God, such that Moses knew when standing on ground made holy by God’s very presence. We know that we are offered hope and joy in a life that extends before us with God’s promise of abundance. Wow! So, what do we do when we say that we believe all this!? Do they know we are Christians by our love? Do they know we are Christians by our joy? Having been asked very simple, very direct questions in China about what I say I believe, I found myself musing throughout this sabbatical time what difference it makes in my life. *What difference does it make in our lives that we say we believe these extraordinary truths?*

After returning to the States, I worshipped one Sunday in Chesapeake, VA, just minutes from Virginia Beach. The college friend I was visiting had been raised as a Catholic in New Jersey, the daughter of a mom and dad originally from Puerto Rico. Most recently, my friend Irene has discovered a connection to what she calls “The Tao,” perhaps not coincidentally, a majority religion in China. She attends a service at her community several times a month, and has said that it gives her glimpses of real personal peace. I have told her that my faith also offers me joy, even while offering hope of a global peace. During that visit, while worshipping at Providence United Church of Christ in Chesapeake, Irene and I saw a glimpse of the beloved community. And you know what? It didn’t look just like me. I had used the “Find a Church” function on the UCC national website, and had chosen the church based on its size and geography. There was only one white person at church last Sunday, and it was me.

My friend Irene says she could probably count the times she had gone to church with her family as a child, and says that she is probably one of the 43% of unchurched folks in national polls now. Mostly, she says, her recollections of church include being made to feel bad that she hadn’t been around more often. She had never felt really welcome. We were made welcome last Sunday. We were met in the parking lot by folks who certainly knew that I was a visitor, and were introduced to the deacons on duty and then to the pastor. We were invited into their pre-worship prayer, and they told Irene about some of the mid-week activities she might be interested in later. We were both greeted with hugs by young and old women, who told us how glad they were that we were there to *worship* with them.

And then the music started. The Hammond Organ wailed, and the drum set beat, and the choir opened up their mouths in praise. They praised God for all the good things God had done for them during the week just past, and they thanked God for being the holy one who guides them on their path. They asked forgiveness for what they might have done to hurt others, and they asked that God be with them in the week ahead. Sound familiar? Somehow, though, this worship, like the Taizé worship in Hong Kong asked me what I would like all of us to ask ourselves this morning. Who do we say that we are, when we say that we are Christians? What is it about the way we live our lives, and particularly about the way we worship that proclaims our identity as Christian? We can fill in the blanks, in a kind of faithful Mad Lib of adjectives and nouns.

I am a Christian. I am joyful. I am a follower of Christ. I am hopeful. I am a believer in the *Holy* God, who has rescued God’s people from all manner of trials. *I am* because God loves me so much that God gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but shall have eternal life. Wow, if we say that we are all these things, our lives begin to look pretty darned good. We have reason to rejoice, which is to say that we have reason to worship together. Thanks be to God, from whom all blessings flow. Amen.