

Living THE Question
a homily by
Dr. Bill Kerley

This homily focuses in on one sentence from the Gospel reading. It is the question Jesus asks his disciples. “Who do you say that I am?” The homily in ten seconds is this: Who is Jesus to you and who is the you who answers that question? I hope by the end of the homily I’ve messed with you mind about both of those matters.

Marcus Borg died earlier this year. Countless people mourned his unexpected death. Borg was one of the leading authorities on the Jesus of history and a leading spokesman for what, over the last number of years, has come to be called the “progressive Christianity” movement. By the time of his death Borg had written 28 books.

I had already read many of them before I met Borg at a Jesus Seminar meeting in New York in 2004. The first book of his I read was “Reading the Bible Again For the First Time.” He also has one, “Meeting Jesus Again For the First Time.” I love those titles because they reflect the non-dual, paradoxical mind-set that I have come to believe is so essential for spiritual transformation.

At one of the breaks I walked up to him and said, “I want you to know that I plagiarize - er, I mean borrow - much of your material.” He just laughed and said, “Borrow freely, my friend, borrow freely.” And, over the years, I have.

Actually, both Marcus Borg and his dear friend, John Dominic Crossan, also one of the leading authorities on the Jesus of history, have both spoken here at St. Paul's. Borg numerous times in Fondren Hall and Crossan actually preached from this pulpit.

Both of these men have done the church an invaluable service in helping those who have been open to and interested in the matter to have a renewed experience with Jesus.

Jesus brought remarkable teachings into this world but, unless a person has access to the kind of work that Borg and Crossan and other scholars have provided for us, the Jesus turf is land-mined with reactions - some personal and some cultural that distort Jesus before we can even get a chance to hear him speak.

There is hardly anyone in this culture who doesn't have some impression about Jesus. These notions are formed primarily by the celebrations of Christmas, the only religious holiday that is also a Federal holiday and is clearly commercial and not religious, and Easter, where the Jesus story gets all squished up with bunny rabbits and colored eggs.

Of course, if you were raised in a church, like I was, and mine was a benignly Fundamentalist church in Tennessee, your image of Jesus is of a tall, blond, white guy and the lessons we were taught range all the way from sweetly sentimental to appallingly guilt-laced. If you were not raised in a church, your image of Jesus may be negative or threatening because it is sadly true that over the centuries institutional Christianity has tended to use Jesus as a battering ram to club the rest of the world into submission.

It is difficult to achieve what the Buddhists call "beginner's mind" about Jesus because the Jesus story is without doubt the most familiar and retold story in history. Since the fourth century until today Christians have been programmed to recite the essentials of what the church thinks needs to be known about Jesus in creeds like the one we will stand and recite together in a few minutes. This creates the illusion that knowing about Jesus is the same as knowing Jesus. Believing in Jesus has come to mean "believing the right things about him." Further, it creates a false sense of security. The belief is, "If I believe these things, then I'm safe and will go to heaven when I die." Which, just for the record, is something Jesus himself never taught. Those original followers who first heard Jesus' teachings, for them the Jesus path was not safe.

The political and religious leaders were dubious about Jesus, even his closet disciples didn't seem to be able to get it right. The crucifixion, so central to our faith, was unwanted by them, misunderstood by them. Further, after his resurrection they looked at him but didn't see him. I think it is arrogant of us to blithely assume we are any less thickheaded than were his first followers.

Many today say “yes” to Jesus assuming that he was the son of God, that he died and rose again, and that in union with him they hope for the same. Those earliest followers didn't know this. What made them say “yes”? When they affirmed “Jesus is Lord,” that was not merely a glib line for or from Sunday School. It was a political statement meaning “we give our allegiance to Jesus and not to Caesar.” And, for saying that, they were, many of them, also, like him, executed. What made them do that?

That’s a question worth pondering.

One of the things I came here to say today is that there is nothing that affects the quality of our lives and our experience of living more than the questions we ask. One of the goals of spiritual work is to raise the questions we habitually and reflexively ask to the level of conscious awareness and replace them with wiser and more useful questions.

We are asking questions from the moment we get up in the morning until we go to bed. Even though the questions seem mundane and inconsequential, they nonetheless affect the quality of our lives:

“Is it time to get up?”

“What’s the weather like out?”

“What’s for breakfast?”

“What will I wear? What’s on the agenda for the day.”

And on it goes.

We start this questions process as soon as we learn to talk.

“Why is the sky blue?”

“Where do babies come from?”

“Why do I have to go to school?”

A mother wakes her son up and says, “Son, hurry up and get up and get dressed or you’ll be late for school.”

“I don’t want to go to school! Why do I have to go to school?” he whines.
“Give me three good reasons.”

“First, because I’m your mother and I say so. Second, because you are 42.
Third, you’re the principle.”

There are, of course, other questions we ask that, though they are not the kind of daily questions I’m thinking about, are life-altering.

“Do you love me? Will you love me? Will you be the one and spend the rest of your life with me?”

If a child is produced from that union, the question is, “Is the mother okay? Is the baby okay?”

Later on in life you look at the doctor and ask, “Is it malignant? How long do I have?”

One of the greatest heresies perpetrated by the Christian church on people has been: “Come join our group. You won’t have to change a thing.” Jesus, as well as every other wise and useful spiritual teacher is quite clear that getting on the path that leads to authentic freedom and true love is going to cost the ego its very life. In today’s reading Jesus says that to follow him means losing one’s life. The “life” he speaks of is everything held dead by the ego.”

Jesus said that the truth would set us free. Truth is not hard to find. It is just hard to keep from running from it when we see it, when we hear it. It is so much what we don’t want.

If you read any of the Jesus narratives available to us, you’ll find that Jesus almost never talked about himself. My current conviction is that Jesus, a Jewish mystical teacher, came out of his own mystical experience to teach by word and deed that not only was he one with God but also so was everybody else. He didn’t come to change God’s mind about us. He came to change our mind about God.

So, it is in that context that Jesus asks THE question: “Who do you say that I am?”

The answers that his followers give don't reflect that they are bad or stupid people. They reflect stages along the developmental path. They were expressions of typical Jewish hope.

The teachings of Jesus are not designed to reveal who he is but, rather, to reveal ourselves to us.

The question here is the thing that matters. Life is not a problem to be solved. Life is a mystery to be entered into. Mysteries are not solved. They are entered into and lived.

Jesus, God, Sacred Mystery - whatever label you want to hang on to it asks, "Who do you say that I am?"

The emphasis is not on who is asking the question, though that, no doubt, is important. The emphasis is on who is answering it.

Who do YOU say that I am.

What complicates answering this question is that we have answers to it that operate like an unknown, unseen operating system within our unconsciousness.

You and I breathe the air of our culture. We can't help but do that? What is that atmosphere?

It is materialism, consumerism - laced with a heavy dose of fear that can easily show up as anger where we project all sorts of stuff on to other people and countries as if they were our problem

One of the questions Jesus implies by and with his teaching is: Can you live in the culture where you live without gaining or losing your identity because of that? Are you willing to gain your identity by following me?

We all have our biases and make our projections. Most of the time we are totally unaware of them.

A drunk, who smelled of beer, sat down on a subway next to a priest. The man's tie was stained, his face was plastered with red lipstick, a half-empty bottle of gin was sticking out of his torn coat pocket. He opened his newspaper and began reading. After a few minutes the man turned to the priest and asked, "Say Father, what causes arthritis?"

The priest shot back, "My Son, it's caused by loose living, being with cheap, wicked women, too much alcohol, contempt for your fellow man, sleeping around with prostitutes and a lack of a bath!"

The drunk muttered in response, "Will, I'll be darned!" then returned to his paper.

The priest, thinking about what he had said, nudged the man and apologized. "I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to come on so strong. How long have you had arthritis?"

The drunk answered, "Oh, I don't have it, Father. I was just reading here that the Pope does."

We all have biases. All of us. Religious people have biases. People who say they are spiritual but not religious have biases. People who claim to be atheists have biases.

Someone said to me this week, after mentioning all the horrible things being done in the name of God all over the world and the high school cafeteria food fight that is passing for political dialogue in our country, the person said, "It's easy for me to see why people see this sort of thing and become atheists."

Actually, I don't think they become atheists as much as they become disbelievers in organized religion. I am reminded of Gandhi's quote: "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

Here is one version of THE question. Remember, the homily is: "Living the Question." Not, "Answering the Question." Here is one version of THE question: Who was Jesus, really? Who are we and how are we to live if we choose to follow him?

What is at the center of our lives? Not what we say is there but what is operationally there? This is both an individual and communal question. What is at the center of our lives both as individuals and as a community of faith will be the source of our security, our guidance, our wisdom and our power.

Someone has gone through the Jesus story and has figured out that Jesus is asked by all sorts of people, his closest followers as well as his enemies, 183 questions. He answers only three of them and two of those aren't really answers.

Jesus himself asks 307 questions.

I wonder if our spiritual work ought not to take this as our pattern? It is when the church has become so sure of its answers that it has gotten so far off the track. The church has become an efficient answering machine.

This is the most important question Jesus asked: "Who do you say that I am?"

Everybody in this cathedral has an answer to this question.

Try to figure out what yours is. Where did it come from? How influential is it in your daily living?

I grew up with the sincere belief that Jesus was a Southern Baptist. Many people stay stuck at that kind of childish level so that they end up with an incomprehensible gulf between who they imagine Jesus was and who he actually is.

As I said, I want to mess with your mind so here goes: Jesus never said he would save anyone. He came not to "save" people but to set people free. He didn't say that he would set them free. He said that the Truth would set you free.

He asked and asks, "Who do you say that I am?"

I can't, nor can you, say who anybody is expect in relationship to that person. In order to answer the question of who someone is you have to have a

personal relationship with that person. Yes, I'm suggesting that you have an ongoing personal relationship with Jesus.

The minute we take Jesus out of our culturally conditioned understanding of him not only does he become different but also so does our relationship with him and so do we. The moment I "get it" that Jesus was a radical Jewish mystical teacher of inclusivity and equality, that changes everything. Who am I now in relationship with that?

What I am trying to stress in this homily is the importance of the right question and the importance of living the questions rather than having answers.

My observation is that people who short-circuit this process either end up in despair or cynicism. Or, they become intellectual or religious bigots.

There is a strong temptation to cheat on the challenge of life by having certain answers to even the most ultimate of questions.

Don't do that.

Listen to him ask:

Who do you say that **I** am?

Who do **YOU** say that I am?

Live those questions.