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“Who Do You Say That I Am?”

One of my favorite Franciscan priests and authors, of which I have a few, is Richard Rohr, who has brilliantly pointed out that while we are created in the image of God, it is “[our] image of God [that] creates [us].” Think of it, we imagine a loving and merciful Creator or even a judgemental omnipotent power, and it is going to shape and form who we are and how we see the world, others, and ourselves. However our God looks, we cannot deny that the one we put in control is very likely going to shape and form how we live and move and have our being. As Rohr argues that for most of western culture, today, in large part because of the baggage and history we have put upon and associated with the great I AM, we as a culture are being to do away with the image of God. Because the image that has so often been formed and pushed and assumed is one of an omnipotent judge whose basic function is to discipline and punish us into submission. A God, we assume, or purport, is just waiting to point out our faults and flaws, as if he was up there going “eh, eh, eh you did it again, just like I knew you would.” And, frankly I don’t blame our larger society for throwing that god away like last week’s leftovers. They are not healthy or nourishing and they simply take up valuable space that could otherwise be put to better use. And, yet, I believe the church, and God and Jesus Christ have something beautiful and enriching and even life changing to offer us. Something significant enough that it would be a shame if we missed it.

This morning Jesus asks us “Who do people say that I am?” And it is a fascinating question given the fact that 2,000 years later we are still trying to understand who Jesus is, and maybe even who people say he is. I mean drive up and down the highway you get one definition, Jesus is the one who wants to save you, or may be the one who decides whether or not you are saved to begin with. Ask someone on the street who they believe Jesus is, and some will say he was one of the greatest prophets, others the guy with long hair who wore sandals and told us to love one another, and even others will say he is God. But what does it matter who we say Jesus is? What does it matter to us today as Christians bearing his name as our religion, especially when so many others are seemingly throwing God away?!

As Jesus first asks us the question “who do people say that I am,” he immediately interjects just as his disciples begin to answer him. As if to correct himself, restating the question, “but who do YOU say that I am.” To which Peter answers, correctly, “you are the Messiah.” And while Peter in that moment may have hit the nail on the head, he still has failed to drive it into place, because the next time he swings he 100% misses. As Jesus goes on to explain to Peter and the disciples what it means, as the Son of God and Son of Man, to be the Messiah. How he must “undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” To which Peter, understandably, takes Jesus aside and says, NO! This cannot be!! This is not the way things are!!! If you are the Messiah, you are the one promised to deliver the Jews, you are the one promised to overthrow the Roman Empire and return us, the chosen people, to our promised land. You are the one to inflict the suffering, reject the unrighteous, and kill those who do not follow you. NOT the other way around?! And who can blame Peter for rebuking Jesus, when what Jesus is proposing is seemingly preposterous, ludicrous, almost suicidal. I mean, how will Jesus be able to build his church around Peter as the rock, when his followers all find out his plan, which doesn’t include overthrowing the empire, but (as it would seem) succumbing to it?!

And yet, this is who Jesus is, and how he points more so to who God is! The one who is ultimately good, ultimately merciful, ultimately loving. So much so that in order to save us all, the Divine gives up Godself. In turn showing us what it truly means to offer salvation, through offering himself and inviting us to do the same. As Jesus says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Another one of my favorite franciscan priests is Fr. Greg Boyle, who started a ministry in Los Angeles, called Homeboy Industries. Who, after a week in his new position as the rector of Dolores Mission Church, in 1988, buried his first parishioner, a teenage girl, who died by gang violence. Then, he buried 8 more in the next 3 weeks. And then, Fr. Boyle says, it was like shootings morning, noon, and night. And so he responded, as he realized that something was deeply broken, and more so that the war on crime was not working. And so, instead of fighting the gang members, he began to befriend them. Over 30 years creating the largest gang intervention, rehabilitation, and re-entry program in the world. What stands out to me the most about Fr. Boyle and his work with the gang members, though, is not his ability to simply befriend those who have been demonized, as they have committed some of the most horrendous crimes, but more so for ability to see these gang members, to see you and I, and the whole of humanity as still being “unshakably good.” For he argues that, as human beings, created in the image of God, “our truth is our goodness, and [thus] our joy is [found in our ability to live] out of that goodness” as more and more we are able to realize we belong to one another. Asserting that in the entirety of his 40 years working with gang members, he has never once met a person who is evil. Yes, he has met people who are traumatized, mentally ill, despondent, and on and on, but never anyone who is evil. As Fr. Boyle argues that the more we are able to claim our unshakeable goodness as it is tied to our belonging to one another, the more we can begin to heal ourselves and the world. Because once we turn towards the light, that is God’s delight and our inherent goodness, the more we live out of that goodness. That goodness, which is our ability to take our focus and attention off simply ourselves and turn it out into the world and others. Out to where true joy is found and shared and created.

This to me is what Jesus means as he says, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” As he invites us to become other centered, instead of self centered. Because the more we give up our life for the sake of the whole, the more we come to live into the joy God so desires for our lives and the world. “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” The sinful and adulterous generation Jesus speaks of may seem like today, but it was then too. From (at least) the time when Jesus was speaking to those gathered around him (although I would argue it was before too). And in spite of it all, Jesus wants us to know and experience and live into the unshakeable goodness that is who we all are as individuals shaped and formed and created in the image of the most compassionate and merciful, selfless and loving God. And we can be assured that this is who God is because Jesus didn’t simply tell us, he showed us, all the way to the cross, and up out of the grave. My friends, that is who God is and that is who we are as well, unshakably good, belonging to one another, called to turn our attention and our love and lives towards the joy that is found in God’s creation, God’s created beings, and in God’s self.