

Who do you say that I am?

(The Case for Adult Education in the Church)

Mark 8:27-38

If you remember, I wasn't sure what I would be doing today. I wasn't sure I'd be preaching or in the back teaching Sunday School. I told Sue Dowswell if she didn't get enough teachers, I'd be back there with her. And I wasn't sure what you were going to do. But you came through. Yay! I asked her earlier this week what I should plan for, and she said, "Preach." So here I am.

All the kids in the kindergarten classroom were drawing pictures. Suzy was working very diligently. Her teacher walked over to Suzy and asked her what she was up to. Suzy said, "I'm drawing God." The teacher said, "But no one knows what God looks like." And Suzy said, "Calm down! They will in a minute!"

In a sense, Jesus is asking the disciples today in our Gospel reading to draw a picture of God. He asks, "Who do you say that I am?" And, like Suzy, Peter seems very confident. "You are the Messiah!" Peter knows what God looks like too.

Now let me ask you this: If you had to draw a picture of God when you were in kindergarten, what would that picture look like? If you were to take the picture of God you held in your mind's eye in kindergarten, and put it next to the picture of God you hold in your mind's eye now, would they be the same? Would they be different? If they're different, when – and how – did that picture of God change for you?

Today Jesus asks you and me, as well as Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" As we explore that, it's helpful to understand what happens for most of us on a faith journey. We journey in tension between an image of God we hold in our mind's eye, and actual experiences we have of God. When this tension between image and experience is in balance, we feel safe. We have a faith that works, and we learn to trust. But a crisis can send all this into imbalance pretty fast. And then something has to change in order for that equilibrium to be re-established. We can't really change our experience, after the fact. But our experiences often lead us to change our perceptions.

Imagine a young man going along just fine, living with the picture of God he held in kindergarten, or when he was confirmed, or whenever his formal religious instruction stopped. But then in his thirties his pregnant wife is killed by a drunk driver, and God is not all-powerful. Or he begins to recover memories of having been abused in the church, and the church has betrayed him. Or he gets his Ph.D. in Geology and the world wasn't created in seven days. Or maybe he discovers he is gay and all he hears about God and church from the media is that he is an abomination and he is not welcome in the church. His childhood picture of God gets disconnected from his adult experience.

Now in order to regain that sense of equilibrium, that balance between image and experience, he does one of three things: 1.) He may reject God all together: throw the baby out with the bathwater. "I'm sorry," he says. "But that stuff just doesn't make any sense." 2.) He may stick with God, but reject the church. I'm spiritual but not religious. 3.) He may stick with both God and the church, for the sake of his family and his family's custom, but he's compelled to do that at arms' length. He's never fully able to trust in a God whose presence he doesn't experience. He's never fully able to embrace a church he doesn't trust. He "goes along," but like a spiritual zombie: disengaged, settling for less so as not to be bothered, or so as not to make waves.

Now why is this? I believe in large part it's because we in the church have not taken Adult Education or Formation seriously. We take Youth Formation very seriously. But a child can grasp only a child's thoughts. A child feels, thinks and acts like a child. No matter how much quality instruction, no matter how many quality experiences we provide for children, a child can grasp only as much as his or her maturity and experience allows. And that's as it should be!

And here's what I find so curious: Jesus taught and formed adults! He embraced and blessed the children, to be sure. Jesus blessed children and taught adults. So many of the concepts he challenged his followers with are well beyond the comprehension of a child. Sometimes I wonder if Christian Education for children becomes a barrier to faith maturity. I wonder if we get a false sense of having learned about God and Jesus as children. And so adults bypass opportunities to deepen and grow in faith, because they mistakenly believe that what they learned as a child is the totality of Christian faith. They've been there and done that and they're not going to go there again. And yet, how many of us adults would be satisfied in our work or relationships or our financial matters with what we understood and the way we understood it before age 16?

Marcus Borg of blessed memory was a Biblical scholar. When somebody said to him "I don't believe in God," he would respond by saying, "Tell me about the God you don't believe in." And almost always, the God they do not believe in is the God they stopped learning about when they were six or sixteen, or the God they could draw a picture of when they were in kindergarten.

Today Jesus asks you and me, as well as Peter, "Who do you say that I am?" My prayer, my hope, my passion, is that you will hear in Jesus' question today an invitation. An invitation to explore and to discover, in community, a God who in Jesus meets you at the heart of who you are, at the heart of where you've been, at the heart of what you've done, at the heart of what's been done to you. A God who takes seriously all that you know, all that you have to do, and all that you have to bear. A God who is passionate about you, a God who is in love with you, and a God who yearns to be in relationship with you.

A core value of this congregation that is emerging from the Discovery Process is discipleship. St. John's has a long history of forming adults in faith. It's in your DNA. An adult formation ministry team has put together several opportunities to do some exploration about what discipleship means this fall, in addition to several groups that have already been meeting who would welcome you. In October I invite you to come with any and all questions you may have on Wednesday evenings. We'll explore them together. Should you accept one of these invitations, I hope you'll visit our Sunday school too. I hope you'll haul out the paper and crayons, and draw a picture of God. I'm eager to see what God looks like too.

Pastor Dana Runestad

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Sources:

Marcus Borg, "Seeing God Again: What's at Stake," in God at 2000, a collection of talks given at a symposium at Oregon State University in February 2000. 2000, Morehouse Publishing, pp. 1-26.

Pastor Norem Harlan, newsletter article first published in "Church Notes," the newsletter of East Side Lutheran Church in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Amanda Hughes, talk given at the ECUSA February 2003 conference, "Will Our Faith Have Children?" in Oakbrook, IL.