

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

Acts 4: 5-12

Matthew 16: 13-20

[Confession of St. Peter, January 18, 2012, Augsburg College Chapel]

So often, words fail us.

I was at the White House last week for the launch of an exciting new project to promote civic learning and work in our colleges and universities. As part of the program, a White House staff member was describing his work on social innovation. He asked the audience what “social innovation” meant to them. One of my fine academic colleagues responded by saying that “social innovation is the deploying of resources to ameliorate entrenched dysfunctions in society.” After a moment of stunned silence, the speaker said, “Oh you mean, finding new ways to solve old problems!”

More on point for the theme of this feast day, the Confession of St. Peter, here is a theological joke along the same lines:

“Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, and James Cone find themselves all at the same time at Caesarea Philippi. Who should come along but Jesus, and he asks the four famous theologians the same Christological question, “Who do you say that I am?”

Karl Barth stands up and says: “You are the *totaliter aliter*, the vestigious *trinitatum* who speaks to us in the modality of Christo-monism.”

Not prepared for Barth's brevity, Paul Tillich stumbles out: “You are he who heals our ambiguities and overcomes the split of angst and existential estrangement; you are he who speaks of the theonomous viewpoint of the *analogia entis*, the analogy of our being and the ground of all possibilities.”

Reinhold Niebuhr gives a cough for effect and says, in one breath: “You are the impossible possibility who brings to us, your children of light and children of darkness, the overwhelming oughtness in the midst of our fraught condition of estrangement and brokenness in the contiguity and existential anxieties of our ontological relationships.”

Finally James Cone gets up, and raises his voice: “You are my Oppressed One, my soul's shalom, the One who was, who is, and who shall be, who has never left us alone in the struggle, the event of liberation in the lives of the oppressed struggling for freedom, and whose blackness is both literal and symbolic.”

And Jesus writes in the sand, “Huh?”

Who do you say that I am? There is something in the poignant question that seems appropriate for the beginning of a new academic term here at Augsburg, for in many ways, it seems to me, this question is at the heart of our educational enterprise in this college that claims to honor the intersections of faith and learning.

As humans – and especially as humans engaged in an academic community – we may have the same tendency as the disciples when faced with this question. First, let me check my sources. History tells us you may be Elijah. My sociological analysis tells me that you look and sound a lot like John the Baptizer. I checked with my theological experts and they say you must be another prophet.

No, Jesus presses them (and us), “Who do you say that I am?” And here we are, left to find words that so often fail us.

We have Peter’s words, which, at least according to Matthew, pleased Jesus enough that he entrusts the future of his movement to this beloved disciple. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God,” Peter proclaims and the keys to the kingdom are suddenly his – though we know the rest of the story and what happened on that fateful night when Peter betrays his Lord. The words sometime failed Peter as well – as they continue to sometimes fail those who live as Peter’s successors in this movement! [But that is for another day...]

What I find so compelling in this passage from Matthew is not primarily Peter’s answer to Jesus’s question, but Jesus’s conclusion that “flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” In other words – words we surely can trust – your answer to this question, the words you need to respond, do not come from yourself, from your vast learning and experience, they come from the One in whom we move and breath and have our being!

And here, then, is the point that I find especially relevant to our work here at Augsburg – this college of the Lutheran church in the city. Our answer to Jesus’s provocative question cannot be someone else’s answer and it cannot come from our own wisdom or experience – it comes only from our openness, our willingness to suspend our normal ways of seeing the world, our giving up control over our knowledge, so that our awesome God might move within us and put the words on our lips.

There is in this claim a call to deep humility, to giving up our need to have all the answers, to being willing even to admit “I don’t know.” And there, as all good teachers know, is the beginning of an authentic education.

Now, let’s admit it, it’s hard to be humble when you are engaged in the heady work of learning and scholarship. Parker Palmer tells a funny story of James Watson and Francis Crick reflecting on the fortieth anniversary of their discovery of DNA. Watson remarks: “The molecule is so beautiful. Its glory was reflected on Francis and me. I guess the rest of my life has been spent trying to prove that I was almost equal to being associated with DNA, which has been a hard task.

Crick – whom Palmer reports was “never...in a modest mood” – then adds: “We were upstaged by a molecule.”

This uncharacteristic – if strained – humility, Palmer says, only points to the power of being part of a community, a community of truth, in which our own agendas are upstaged by what the poet Rilke calls “the grace of great things.”

Such is the community of which we are a part, this teaching and learning community we call Augsburg College. It is a community grounded in a faith tradition that believes that our human knowledge is incomplete, and that it is only when we admit our inability to know fully, admit that now we see only dimly as through a mirror, that we might be open to genuine learning., that we might know the grace of great things.

Martin Luther’s wise edict in the catechisms to ask “What does this mean?” is a provocative – both literally and figuratively – invitation to education, to learning, to a lifelong curiosity about the wonders of God’s good world and creation. Similarly, John Polkinghorne recalls that “the great nineteenth-century physicist, James Clark Maxwell, who was a devout Christian, had the second verse of Psalm 111, ‘Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them’, inscribed in Latin on the entrance gates into the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge.”

And so, at the beginning of our new academic term, on this feast day celebrating St. Peter’s confession, we stand in awe of the saints who have come before us, moved by our awesome God to proclaim and live their faith. Thanks be to God.

As for me, I will stand with many of you, I imagine, in this community of teaching and learning, this community of faith, hearing Jesus’s invitation, his penetrating “Who do you say that I am?”, and admitting “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief,” and then entering with great joy and humility into the work ahead – even as words may fail me. May it be so.