

ARE YOU THE ONE?

Isaiah 11:1-10
Matthew 3:1-2, 11-12; 11:2-6

Faith Community
December 9, 2007

Introduction

Have you read the stories about Mother Teresa's private diaries? This woman who gave her whole life to caring for people who were dying in the streets of Calcutta, who won the Nobel Peace Prize, and who is now on fast-forward toward sainthood in the Catholic Church, kept a private diary. This intimate record apparently reveals that she had some serious doubts about God.

Many people were shocked to hear this. How could this great servant of God have doubts about God? Some talk about at least slowing the pace of progress toward making her a saint.

But maybe we can see how she could have doubts. Every day she picked up dying people off the streets in India and provided them with comfort, dignity, and hope in the last days of their lives. Wouldn't it all get to you before long? Wouldn't you soon question why the God you've given your life to would allow people to suffer and die like that, while others bask in enormous wealth? Do you suppose it troubled her that most people offered her admiration, but also apathy about changing anything?

To me it makes her a more real saint. She no longer is that towering, bigger-than-life idol; she has the same questions as you and me. She is human after all. For me, she has become a real Christian, no longer an icon.

I

The wonderful poet, Jane Kenyon, (who was from Ann Arbor incidentally) didn't have anything to do with the church until she moved to New England and was pressured to go by her husband. She wasn't interested in the church because she thought you couldn't be intelligent and also a Christian. On her first Sunday in church, the preacher gave a thoughtful sermon in which he quoted Rilke, one of her favorite authors.

She decided she'd have to rethink her assumptions. Within a few months she had joined the church and she became a devout follower of Christ. Before too long she was elected the treasurer of the church.

Toward the end of her short life, she went on a speaking tour to some of the most impoverished places on earth. Seeing such horrible poverty shook her faith. She questioned how God could allow such innocent people to die like that. She wrote a few poems, which were angry and which questioned God.

After her death, her husband debated whether to publish these angry poems she had written because so much of her life and work was devout and committed to faith. Would people think she had lost her faith completely? He decided to include them because this was a part of her struggle with faith. She had doubts and questions like every thinking Christian.

Lots of people have questions about their faith. To me Jane Kenyon's questions made her a more mature Christian – one who doesn't accept easy solutions and pat answers. She wrestled with her faith.

II

In our scripture today John the Baptist appears on the scene before Jesus begins his ministry. He is out there in the wilderness, a wild looking guy who wears a camel hair pelt around his waist, tied with a leather belt. He eats locusts and wild honey.

John the Baptist is a strong, dynamic figure – he isn't afraid to call the righteous temple leaders a brood of vipers! He shouts about the axe lying at the root of the tree.

Then he says that he isn't the One, but that the One is coming after him, and he isn't even worthy to carry this man's sandals. He says, "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." A little later he baptizes Jesus.

We all know that John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus. He gets people ready to hear what Jesus has to say; he helps them understand who Jesus is.

Then, just eight short chapters later, this powerful John the Baptist has serious doubts of his own. This hard-hitting proclaimer of Jesus as the Christ now questions his own words. The one who baptized Jesus has doubts about Jesus.

Of all the characters in the New Testament, John the Baptist is among the strongest, most faithful people around Jesus, but this towering figure is now plagued by questions. So, from his cell in prison John the Baptist sends his friends to ask Jesus, "Was I right about you or not?"

Have you ever had questions? Had doubts? You're in very good company.

III

John the Baptist decides to ask Jesus point blank. His followers hunt down Jesus and they ask him, "Are you the one, or should we wait for another?"

Now, one thing about Jesus is that he doesn't give you the answer you expect. We twentieth century Americans expect Jesus to explain to John the Baptist's followers about why he is God's son. It would include God's plan to save humanity, how he is related to God, why he is God's son. Surely there would be words in there about being our savior and eternal life.

But Jesus says, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, deaf hear, dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

Can't you just see John's followers standing there with the mouths open? Huh? Jesus talks about healing, making people well, restoring their lives to wholeness, giving them life again. Jesus says, "Tell John the Baptist about these acts of compassion."

There isn't one word in Jesus' response that has to do with beliefs – what Jesus believes or what others ought to believe. There's nothing about salvation. Instead Jesus talks about how he has touched people and healed them.

IV

This makes me think about what Jesus' words mean for you and me. If someone came to us and said, "Are you a follower of Christ, or should I look for another?" How would we respond? We might say "I believe that Jesus is the Son of God, I've taken him as my personal savior, I believe in every word of the Apostle's Creed, I faithfully live by the Ten Commandments." That would be right and good.

Or, I guess from what Jesus said, we could say, "I help to feed the poor, our church reaches out to those who are hurt – the lame, the blind, the deaf, those who are battling physical and social problems, we care for the forgotten people, and the untouchables of our society."

The witness that Jesus gives to John the Baptist is about caring for people who are hurting. I wonder if Jesus is more concerned with how we treat other people than he is about the correctness of our theology or our political viewpoints.

Conclusion

On the morning of October 10, 2006 Charles Roberts IV went to a one room Amish school house, ordered most people out of the building, tied up ten schoolgirls and shot them. Then he killed himself. Five of the ten girls died.

We watched as the Amish community grieved at this unthinkable loss. We watched as they buried their dear children.

And we watched as they reached out to the family of that raging gunman. They talked with the family while still choking back the tears of their tragedy. They provided financial assistance to the widow of the man who brutally killed their children. They did what does not seem humanly possible.

We watched as they returned love for hatred, healing for sickness, peace for violence. No one who witnessed what those gentle people did can have any doubt whether they are followers of Christ.

Amen