Billy Amoss: Who Do You Say That I Am?

Sunday, August 25, 1996
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Who Do You Say That I Am?

Who do you say that I am?

Have you ever asked this question of anyone? It is a dangerous question to ask. The answer could be a matter of life or death, as the story of Jesus' life makes plain. It is a question that always gives the one who answers enormous power to judge and to condemn – or to affirm and bless.

Who do you say that I am?

The answer to this question of identity, which Jesus poses to his disciples in today's Gospel reading, is the central message of all four Gospels. "Who do you say that I am?" "You are the Christ, the son of the living God," Simon Peter answers. And Jesus blesses Simon Peter for recognizing his true identity. The same answer would later condemn Jesus to death when he is brought before the chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin: "Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God," the High Priest demands to know. "Yes, it is as you say." With this refusal to deny who he is, his terrible fate is sealed.

Who do you say that I am?

The recognition of true identity, whether of ourselves or others, is not easy to live with, for the consequences are often costly and sometimes ask of us more than we are prepared to give. At the critical moment Simon Peter, overcome with

fear, would say that he did not even know Jesus. But I propose that the Gospels teach us that as terrible as the question of who we truly are may be, an honest answer, while perhaps costing us our life, is at the same time our salvation. Judas bought his life by betraying Jesus, but lost salvation by renouncing who he was, a disciple, and then found that he no longer had a reason to live and hanged himself.

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The question can be truly terrifying, and so it is no wonder that we often shrink from asking it. We are afraid to hear the answer. But in fact our culture, shaped by our Judeo-Christian tradition, gives us answers to this question all the time, whether we ask or not. The answers, which are really a form of judgment, shape our identity and determine how we experience ourselves in this world – – whether we are worthy to be alive, whether we are O.K. or not O.K.

Several weeks ago a man preached in this sanctuary about growing up gay. The condemnation of society, including the Church, penetrated every aspect of his life, not because he had done anything, but because of who he knew he was. Naturally, his reaction was to keep his homosexuality a dark secret. Nevertheless, he felt the harsh judgment of the world as if he had revealed his sexuality openly for all to see. One day he would reach the point where he would risk his life – his place and identity in society – for the sake of making known his true identity. He risked becoming an outcast because the salvation of his true self, of his soul, was more important.

For those who think that sexuality is not central to one's identity in our Christian tradition, I would invite you to read Elaine Pagel's *Adam , Eve, And The Serpent*, a book that traces the first four centuries of Christianity, the period during which the Christian movement evolved from a defiant sect, persecuted by the state, into the religion of emperors.

Twenty years after Jesus, his zealous disciple Paul , one of the most important leaders of early Christianity, would often speak of marriage as a sop for those too weak to do what is best – renounce sexual activity altogether. Paul admits that marriage is not a sin but argues in 1 Corinthians that marriage makes both partners slaves to each other's sexual needs and desires, no longer free to devote their energies to the Lord. Paul encourages even those who marry to live as if they, too, were unmarried: "Let those who have wives live as though they had none" (1 Corinthians 7:29b). From this – to me, at least – deeply disturbing attitude toward HETEROSEXUAL love, Pagels leads us through the next three centuries, when the majority of Christians believed that the greatest freedom demanded the greatest renunciation – celibacy – and finally to the man whose pessimistic views of sexuality and human nature, whose aversion to "the flesh," would become, in Elaine Pagels words, "the dominant influence on western Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, and color all western culture ever since." I am, of course, referring to St. Augustine. Augustine taught that all of nature as we know it is in a state of chronic disease, that sexual desire and death are unnatural, that all humankind is fallen and corrupt as a consequence of Adam and Eve's transgression. This ideology of universal corruption based on the mere fact of sexual desire and death makes one, as a Christian, more than a little reluctant to probe the hidden recesses of the Self in search of an answer to the question of who we really are, for our very nature is untrustworthy. That we cannot simply ignore our sexuality is made plain by Augustine himself, who freely admits to the uncontrollable power of sexuality ; in fact, precisely because it is not subject to complete control by the will he condemns it as evil.

My mother's uncle was only a few years older than she. That was because his parents (my mother's grandparents) were both in their late forties when he was born. The year was 1918. Apart from the fact that his mother almost made the Guinness

Book of World Records for having given birth at such a ripe old age, the late birth was not without its measure of shame: clearly the parents had made love for reasons other than to procreate, which was the only acceptable reason to engage in sex, according to Church teaching.

When was the last time you asked forgiveness for feeling sexual desire for your spouse?

As a Christian, these are difficult things to speak about. Like poisoned-tipped arrows they go to the very core of my faith. Must I cover myself in shame and perpetually ask forgiveness for my very nature, which I am powerless to alter.? Is the only way out to give up my body in a vain attempt to become spirit?

The other day as I was pondering these questions, feeling weighed down by the grim implications of the Fall/Redemption spirituality of Christianity, I stepped into St. Matthew's Cathedral on Rhode Island Avenue. In the cathedral there is a small chapel dedicated to the 12th century mystic St. Francis where I like to pray. On the walls of the chapel are mosaics depicting the life of the saint, and under each mosaic, like a caption to a photograph, is a verse from the "Song of the Creatures," St. Francis's glorious ode to the Creator that affirms the goodness of creation – after the Fall. He describes creation as having male and female attributes that are interwoven to form a unity at one with the One, with God:

> *Praise to you, my Lord, for our sister, Mother Earth,*
> *who sustains and governs us*
> *and produces fruits with colored flowers and herbs.*
>
> *Praise to you, my Lord, for our brother sun,*
> *who brings us the day and also brings us the light;*
> *fair is he, and shining with a very great splendor.*

St. Francis celebrates the complex interweavings of the human,

the cosmic, and the divine, and offers a vision of matter impregnated with the boundless love of the Creator, so very different from the Fall/Redemption paradigm that has dominated Christian thought.

St. Francis is part of a tradition of creation-centered spirituality which is traced to Hildegard of Bingen, who died in 1179, the year that St. Francis was born. The goodness of creation is at the very center of her theology, and the world is totally embraced by it. Hildegard dares to depict human beings in truth – as creators, and as destroyers. But she makes it clear that to be human is "to choose, to respond with awareness, and to act accordingly." (from the Introduction to *Hildegard Of Bingen*, by Gabriele Uhlein.) "In the world," she says," it is possible to do either good or bad."

But what kind of a world has she got in mind?

Listen:

> *As the creator loves his creation*
> *so creation loves the Creator.*
> *Creation,*
> *of course,*
> *was fashioned to be adorned,*
> *to be showered,*
> *to be gifted with the love of'*
> *the Creator.*
> *The entire world has been embraced*
> *by this kiss.*
> *God has gifted creation with everything*
> *that is necessary.*

This is not the chronically diseased world of St. Augustine. We are fashioned in the image of the Creator, as Scripture tells us, and yet… and yet, at the same time, we are not angels.

There is an undeniable truth to the Jesus prayer, which assumes that before anything ,we need God's mercy:

> *"Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."*

This is a prayer that I find particularly comforting in moments of anxiety or fear. I do not have to prove that I am worthy in order to receive God's mercy, for it is given freely. But still I am free to choose between good and evil, I do not stand condemned for simply being human. For this assurance , and for the beautiful way they express it, I give thanks to the mystics, St. Francis and Hildegard of Bingen.

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We must not be afraid to name those things in our tradition that condemn us before we even have the chance to exercise free will, that tell us that our basic nature is untrustworthy. On the other hand, we must not be blind to the capacity for evil in each of us, for violating God's creation, for taking the gift of life for granted. Last week I read with great interest an article in the POST about Millard Fuller, the Christian founder of Habitat for Humanity. Clearly this is a man of great compassion for humanity, especially the poor. But there was one aspect of his Christian outlook that seemed hard, less than fully compassionate. The houses that are built with the labor of volunteers are not given to the poor. Rather, the poor must qualify for the housing by demonstrating that they hold steady jobs and will be able to pay the interest-free mortgage. If they default, they will eventually lose their house, just like the rest of us. So who does Millard Fuller say that the poor are? What is it about human nature that makes him believe that it would be wrong, as a Christian, to give the houses to the poor, rather than insisting that they pay for them. "As much as you need this," he seems to be saying, " I might hurt you, violate your soul, if I simply give it to you. But I will work hard to help you,

if you are willing to help yourself." He is a lover of humanity with a healthy respect for human nature. He loves but does not idealize, nor does he condemn. I believe there is a lesson in this for all of us as we ask one another who we are, a lesson that I fear is subtly, and yet fundamentally, different from the one inherent in the welfare reform that has just been signed into law.

Who do you say that I am?

Though there is a time to answer, and a time to be silent, let our answer, when it is given, be honest and true. It could be a matter of life or death.