

“Who are You?” by Billy Amoss

December 17, 2017



Third Sunday of Advent

Our reading for today from the Gospel of John contains these lines:

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?”

Who are you? Has anyone asked you that recently? And when was the last time you put that question to someone?

In fact, if we pay attention to how our mind works, we will notice that we ask that question of everyone we encounter, whether aloud or silently, to see how they fit into the running narrative in our minds that shapes and makes sense of our reality. What we are really asking is, “What story do you belong to?” And for each person in our lives – whether the stranger, a friend, a lover, a relative, a co-worker – we have constructed an answer to the question of who they are and assigned them an identity and role in a narrative.

The danger is that in our minds the identity of others can easily become fixed and immutable. And that's when relationships become brittle and can even turn hostile.

At the very least, refusing to allow the identity of others to evolve and change over time, to give up our expectations of how another should answer the question "Who are You?," is a refusal on our part to question the narrative of who we are, to let go of identities and roles when they no longer serve us.

This refusal can lead to arrested development and a life of anxiety and fear.

John answers the priests and Levites from Jerusalem who ask him who he is by saying who he is not. This strange figure who is baptizing people in the Jordan River does not fit any narrative in their minds. John says he is not the Messiah, nor is he Elijah or the Prophet, figures who were to presage the coming of the Messiah. Frustrated, the priests and Levites ask him to give them some affirmative answer to take back to the authorities in Jerusalem. John's answer further upends their expectations by quoting the prophet Isaiah:

I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness

Make straight the way of the Lord.

Disrupting the prevailing story held and promoted by the powerful is playing with fire. And for John, we know, this did not end well. Needless to say, Jesus did this in a way that was even more radical and threatening to the Powers.

So Christianity is founded on a narrative that departs from the old one, a new story, if you will, but one that became, over time, the dominant one and subject to misuse and abuse, like all powerful stories that go mainstream. As Christians I would like to ask us to reclaim the open mind and the courage it took for early Christians to allow a new story to enter

consciousness, to see the world and each other with fresh eyes, so that we can grow individually and together as a community into the fullness of being. For surely this is what we are invited to do by the Holy Spirit at every moment, for the Holy Spirit has no limitations, and, as Peter explains to the Apostle in Acts, the Holy One's Spirit is poured out on all mankind.

How do we challenge the stories we use to understand reality, so that we can be sure the narrative in our mind is – and continues to be – truly life-giving and growth-promoting, and we don't just hold on to the old understandings because they are familiar? Where do we start?

I think the most fundamental question to ask ourselves is this: Does my story about a certain individual or a group of people, or an entire ethnic group or nationality, recognize and affirm their humanity, affirm that they are children of God? If not, there is something suspect about my story.

This is easier said than practiced. In my own life I look for role models from whom to learn and whom I can try to emulate.

All of my ancestors, even my Jewish ancestors, fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War. I used to be proud of that; now I am deeply troubled by it. But there is an important ray of hope in this history. My great-great grandfather, Isaac Newton Marks, a convert to Christianity from Judaism, was a merchant in New Orleans who after the Civil War was the leading voice in a short-lived but significant political movement that advocated for the full recognition of Blacks, all Blacks, as citizens with the same rights as white people. Can you imagine this in 1873 New Orleans, 140 years ago? Several prominent citizens joined him, and their movement, called the Unification Movement, was a multiracial campaign by a group of post-Civil War New Orleanians to rise above ancient hatreds and the partisan politics of the Reconstruction era. The movement's manifesto called for political equality, racial

unity and an end to discrimination. More than 1800 prominent Louisianians of all colors and creeds stepped forward to sign the Unification Movement's recorded principles. The Committee of One Hundred, a group of 50 Blacks and 50 whites, constituted the core of the Unification Movement. As chairman of the movement, the group chose an idealistic Jewish businessman, Isaac Newton Marks, my ancestor. The New Orleans Tribune, the first Black daily newspaper in the United States, reported that Marks said: "It is my determination to continue to battle against these abstract, absurd and stupid prejudices, and to bring to bear the whole force of my character to break them down. They must disappear, they will disappear."

But bitterness and resentment smoldered beneath the surface of the reconstructed South, and after only a few months the noble Unification Movement was swept aside by the darker forces of southern opposition to the federally-imposed Reconstruction, and supplanted by white supremacist leaders and Jim Crow laws that would hold sway until the aftermath of another major war, World War II. And as we know all too well, we are still battling the old story founded on racism and white privilege. The new story of inclusiveness is still struggling to be heard and embraced. I try remember my ancestor, Isaac Newton Marks, when I notice that I am slipping back into the old story of prejudice, fear, and racism.

As many of you know, the small foundation that I direct has been working in Gaza and the West Bank for almost ten years, helping the Palestinian Ministry of Health to strengthen child healthcare services. In 2012 I read a brief article in the Washington Post about a Palestinian man, the son of a watermelon farmer in the West Bank, who, while earning his PHD in Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin, was inspired by the Fair Trade movement in coffee. And so when he returned to his home village near Jenin in the West Bank he organized

the olive farmers, who were barely eking out a living producing olive oil, into a cooperative to produce organic and fair trade olive oil for sale in Europe and the U.S. Now, as the article reported, it was 8 years later, and this man, Nasser Abufarha, had lifted entire villages out of poverty with his olive oil cooperative called Canaan Fair Trade. After reading the article I decided I must meet this extraordinary man, which I did the next time I was in the West Bank. It happened to be olive harvest time, and Nasser showed me all around the cooperative. I noticed how happy and lighthearted the farmers and their families were as they brought their olive harvest to be pressed into extra virgin olive oil by the state-of-the art olive press Nasser had purchased from Italy. I tasted the golden olive oil as it flowed from the press, and it was like ambrosia! As we sat over lunch following the private tour I asked Nasser what he needed most in order for Canaan Fair Trade to continue to thrive. He said: I want someone to make a film about this work of the Palestinian people, and I want the film to be for an American audience, so that the American people can see the human face of the Palestinians.

I told him I had no experience in filmmaking, but I would see what I could do.

Overtime I became passionate about this film project. The more I travelled to Israel/Palestine the more I realized the need and the urgency of helping to tell this story about Palestinians, which was so different from the prevailing narrative in the mainstream media.

With the generous help of Seekers and others, the film is now being made. We are only at the beginning, but after years of feeling helpless and frustrated the project has been launched. I intend to share with Seekers the results of the first phase of the film's development in the early spring.

Will the film change the way Americans see Palestinians? I am

not some David prepared to take on the media "Goliath" who shapes the news coming out of Palestine only to reinforce entrenched narratives. I know the value of incrementality, so I will try to discipline myself to take one step at a time and resist grandiose intentions. From the Seekers Growing Edge Fund I learned that following a call, taking an idea that will not let go of you and living it out, is more important than success or failure. I am being asked to realize the idea of the film, to tell a story that will make a heart connection between the audience and the olive farmers of Canaan Fair Trade. That's the call, nothing more or less.

As Christians I believe we have our own collective work to do to ensure that the stories that guide our spiritual journey always recognize and affirm the humanity of every person, group, or nationality. This means paying attention, staying alert, and not succumbing to the temptation of questionable faith-based explanations of events that mask or justify the great harm they cause. In fact we are witnessing just such a phenomenon with the vociferous affirmation of white Evangelicals of President's Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

To these Evangelicals, Trump is following their agenda. Johnnie Moore, President Trump's leading evangelical adviser, told CNN that the status of Jerusalem was a top priority to the President's core evangelical supporters, second only to concerns about the judiciary. According to the evangelicals' "narrative" the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital is a key step leading to the rebuilding of the Temple, and this in turn will eventually initiate the end-time of the Book of Revelation. Evangelical cleric John Hagee noted on CBN News : "I believe at this point in time Israel is God's stopwatch for everything that happens to every nation, including America, from now until the Rapture of the church and beyond." So President Trump is carrying out God's will. Anticipated violent reaction is easily dismissed as irrelevant and even

necessary. Trump is taking us to the Climax of History, and peace in this world doesn't matter. In fact, this narrative allows people of faith to witness brutal beatings and killings and celebrate them as fulfilling Biblical prophecy because these events will lead to the Rapture of the church – the snatching away of the righteous to heaven. In the context of this grand narrative, is it any wonder that the sexual misconduct, unvarnished mysogeny and racism of our president don't matter to his core "Christian" supporters?

I know quite a few Palestinian Christians to whom this narrative is deeply misguided. Many of the Christians of Palestine are the descendants of the earliest Christian communities. Today most are Greek Orthodox, but they also include Catholics, Lutherans and Anglicans. The Reverend Mitri Raheb, a Lutheran pastor in Bethlehem, was quoted in the Washington Post as saying, "The Bible originated in Palestine, not the Bible Belt, but people in the Bible Belt read the Bible in a way that makes our lives difficult." He continued, "When they talk about Christian minorities in danger, they talk about Iraq and other regions where ISIS is the threat. They never ever address the issue of Palestinian Christians under Israeli occupation."

As people of faith we have an obligation not to buy into any narrative that welcomes violence against others as a means to achieving some greater purpose, as then we lose our own humanity. We are violating the great commandment to love our neighbor as ourself – to, as Paul exhorts the congregation in Thessalonica, see that none of us repays evil for evil, but we always seek to do good to one another and to all.

May the stories that form the narrative of our lives always reflect and support that great and difficult intention, and if they do not, may we have the courage to let them go and be open to allow a new story to form.

