

Title: Questions that unlock me: Who do you say that I am?

Texts: Exodus 1:8-2:10; Matthew 16:13-20

Rev. Sharon Smith

The contrast in today's selection of readings is stark...

We have a Hebrew story that gives one perspective on the movement of Jacob or Israel's descendants into slavery and oppression. We are told that the new King did not remember Joseph. Relationship, trust between diverse groups was broken, and the Egyptians feared the growing number of Israelites.

This story of oppression and acts of mercy in the context of violence, is **juxtaposed** with a question and a key of authority.

How interesting that we are called to look at Matthew chapter 16 - the gospel reading assigned for today, through a liberation lens.

Friends, the question Jesus asked of his first century disciples – Who do you say that I am? When given only to the minds of the powerful can have detrimental effects.

I think of a portrait hanging at the back of a small church in the shrinking BC town of Fort Nelson. A well-known image of Jesus, white-skinned with flowing golden hair and beard. Every week this dark-skinned African minister would stand in front of the congregation, preaching of a liberating gospel to a mixed congregation of indigenous and non-indigenous people, all the while staring at a Jesus that made him feel small and powerless.

I think of the extreme version of the American Evangelical Jesus who seems to support capitalism, patriotism and white supremacy. And I wonder how human beings can come up with this out of the legacy of a homeless middle Eastern social disruptor, who is never recorded to have touched money and who hung out with societies rejects, who regularly crossed racial, ethnic and religious boundaries. And lest we blame those South of the border, I believe this holds up a mirror to each of us, of how terribly we can distort the life and teachings of Jesus to suit ourselves.

Sharon Grussendorff, Who is Jesus? Solitude Retreat Centre reflection

And just to add some levity, I think of a cartoon by Bizzaro, where Jesus and the Buddha sit on the clouds in the afterlife, the Buddha says: "I should've made one of those nobody-can-depict-me rules. They always make me fat".

Jesus replies: "Tell me about it, I've been blond white dude for like, 2000 years!"

It's interesting this week that I spent so much time reading every author I could think of, trying to find the **key** to answering the question: Who is Jesus? Looking for the right answer.

- Marcus Borg's human Jesus and post resurrection Christ
- CS Lewis: Jesus can only be three things: Lord, Liar or Lunatic
- NT Wright: Jesus is a God-man who re-organized Jewish symbols around himself
- Catherine Keller: Jesus is irreducible from four distinct gospel portraits

Somehow in history Matthew 16 has become a powerful framing for us,

- seeing the key given to Peter, as a symbol of authority,
- giving authority to some to answer questions of meaning
- while silencing others.

Prompted by the testimony of the courageous acts of the midwives Shiprah and Puah, who followed their hearts, instead of their fear of the king, I was moved to read other interpretations of our gospel. Hidden ones often not brought into the mainstream.

I stumbled on the writing of Kenyan scholar: JOHNSON KĪRIAKŪ KĪNYUA

Dr. Johnson Kinyua in his ministerial role in Kenyan churches was deeply dissatisfied with the bible given to the people. A Bible translated from the Greek via English into his Kenyan dialect. Though well meaning, he discovered that the lens of the colonial translators, slighted African traditional beliefs – one example was the word chosen for Hades was 'Ingoma' – the place of the Spirits – or ancestors. A sacred realm that held meaning, memory, saints, and hope.

The church was placed in opposition to this realm. Above, oppressing sacred Kenyan beliefs. "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

In this particular Matthew passage, Johnson highlights the first question Jesus asks:

Who do the 'people of the land' say that I am? (Hoi Anthropoi)

He notes how this question is placed in subordination to Peter's answer.

And wonders, what if the question were given back to the people to answer?

We might then hear a variety of answers as we do in the later compiled Gospel of Thomas:

Where Thomas responds to Jesus' question:

"My mouth could never utter what you are like".

When this question is freed from the 'right' answer. Freed from the realm of the 'one's who know'...

- we are given the opportunity to live into the question
 - questions
 - that can make
 - or unmake
 - a life,

 - questions
 - that have patiently
 - waited for you,
-
- questions
 - that have no right
 - to go away.

This is one of those questions – that doesn't go away. It isn't meant to. For if we think we have arrived at an answer, we haven't really entered deeply enough into the Jesus story, we haven't fully been unlocked by the mystery of the resurrected Christ.

Perhaps there isn't an answer key that unlocks the question...
Perhaps the question is the key that unlocks us...

There is one haunting and beautiful image of Jesus that I choose to gaze at regularly.
It is a piece of art by Janis McKenzie.

It is called Jesus of the People. A copy of it is in the Narthex for you to look at as you exit and for those online, it is in the sermon section with the other art, resources and children's activities for today.

Janis McKenzie painted this portrait 20 years ago, with an African American woman as her model.

This poem was written in response:

This morning I woke up with a brush in my hand, determined to deconstruct the image of a mono-toned man who only reflects one side of salvation.

The hieroglyphics of hierarchy have bleached your blemishes
With despotism and domination since before I was conceived
But this morning, it will change.

This morning, the silenced voices of my own ancestors will dance
Through the hues of your hair.

This morning, the persecuted presence of lost populations
Will thrive through the tones of your countenance.

This morning, the cries of the Cherokee
Will ring through the satin of your garb,
And the voices of bigotry
Will be silenced through the shading of every lost seeker.

This morning, the beauty of night and noir and noise will eradicate all limitations of my salvation and my canvas will capture the beauty of each color in the world.

This time, the truth and hope and glory found in the every drop of dew and in every morsel of majesty will come alive on this easel.

This time, the splendor of my savior will seep into sources it has never seen because the brush I use has been erected by the fingers of fluid faith.

This time, I will paint your face the color of water,
Your skin the hue of a night sky,
Your body reflective of each person who has ever seen beauty in the moon.

Kaeley J. McEvoy

Who do you say that I am?