

Who? Matt 16 8.27.17 FHC Rev. Dr. Robin Blair

Who do you say that I am in our bible story today, illuminates for us all an important question, because we have to assign a name and value to the importance of who Jesus was and is, for us, today. The question is relevant and central to our belief system, what we live out of, in our communities and congregational life, together. Who is he, to you? And what difference does that make?

As we read and hear headlines about how people are relating to one another with hate and violence, we must not ignore the opportunity to tell ourselves what Jesus means to us and why it is important. How does what Jesus means to us matter in our behavior and what we anchor to as important, giving life meaning, today? Who do we say that he is – as a meaningful difference in our lived togetherness as a congregation and as individuals. And do we find a different meaning in this scripture than others who also claim our faith? Here is something from the anti-defamation league: In short, yes, there are many differences, here is one.

The "Lost Tribes" Found

One of the most remarkable developments in the extreme right in the United States in the past few decades has been the rise of an obscure

religious ideology known as Christian Identity. Penetrating existing racist and anti-Semitic groups and movements, it has inflamed their bigotry with religious fervor and also sparked the creation of many new groups. Adherents have committed hate crimes, bombings and other acts of terrorism. Identity's current influence ranges from Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi groups to the anti-government militia and sovereign citizen movements-yet most Americans are unaware that it even exists.

Christian Identity's origins can be traced back to the nineteenth century in Great Britain, where a small circle of religious thinkers advanced the idea, known as British-Israelism or Anglo-Israelism, that modern Europeans were biologically descended from the ancient Israelites of the Old Testament-specifically, from the "Lost Tribes" scattered by invasions of Hittites, Assyrians and Babylonians. The Lost Tribes had purportedly made their way to Europe, and from them descended the modern European nationalities.

Christians and hate crimes – it is not a surprise that it is difficult to read scripture and imagine a God of mercy and love, when these messages of ego and corruption are so loud through the megaphone of evil intentions to thwart all that is good, that our message of grace is not screaming and is missed when hate grabs the headlines.

As Nelson Mandela, one of the great peacemakers of living memory said, *we were not born learning to hate – if it can be learned, it can be unlearned.*

I hope that I have unlearned hate that I learned in this life, and I promise you to continue to unlearn, hate, in my own life, and I hope too, that as Christians, together, we find as many ways as possible to unlearn what the world would have us be a part of in that sense of hate, rather than the love of one another as Jesus commanded was expected to be the

choice we make when we follow Him. This is hard, because I want to hate *Christian Identity* people and Neo-Nazis, and the haters in general. Anybody else? Jesus says we have to try another thing, we cannot multiply the hate. I am unlikely to be best friends with the haters, because I have worked hard to find a spiritual truth, in spite of the world and all of the challenges you and I have all faced – hardships, loss, you have had yours and I have had mine and it is unlikely the challenges and journeying is over, so, we cope with our faith and our love. Who do you say that I am, he asks? Could he be, hope?

Ghandi spoke it, lived it, Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke it, lived it, others too – lots of brilliant and faithful people – some famous, some whose names we will never know – I was just reading in the most notable *Cornelians* about Georgia Harkness – formidable woman and in no small way a part of how women were finally ordained to full membership in the Methodist church, only 60 years ago – brave, brilliant, educator, preacher – she knew Christ as hope and perhaps, truth - but what I found in the great people whose lives truly help others, is they all have in common a willingness to let go of hating, unhook from that trap and temptation. Can we do it – we can if we are able to answer the question: who do you say that I am – and live in relationship to him in that answer, and he through us, as we are, now. Who?

Is he the God of such love and desire for creation that He came to live in a relationship with us, God, this pure divine cosmic love, became a human being. Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus made it possible for all people to live in a relationship with God. Who do you say that I am? Is He the Way, the Truth, and the Life?

And, of course, preachers across the planet are speaking differently about this today – it is the revised common lectionary reading and will be shared by many. And shared differently. What would you say to people you know if they ask such a question of you? **What about that God of yours – a whole lot of hate going round, eh?**

There is good and there is evil and it has shown itself, forever. It is really ugly, once again, in the headlines. The temptation of evil is too much to overcome for some... too much to overcome.

One of the prayerful thoughts that occurred to me is this: the polarization of good and evil, is like the midwives and the pharaoh – he ordered something evil, born of his fear and the women disobeyed. As a result, Moses was born – and he lived. Moses' mother took a chance – and we know the story. The baby was raised in the royal household and his sense of justice because known to him. He led the Hebrews on the

Exodus... all because the midwives spoke truth to power, lived love instead of evil's fear and hate. There was mercy that evil could not prevent. Is there anything other than a transcendent power of divine nature that could have guided such risk? What is the truth to power, today? What love guides the voices that are raised up in resistance to this ugly, this evil in the world? Are there really different ways to see this evil? Who do you say that I am? Maybe you are Mercy...

There is a woman who is an advisor on spiritual matters to the 45th president of US, called Paula White, who is just publishing a book – and Donald Trump has written an endorsement that is on the cover - glowing terms for her. I watched her on Jim Bakkers TV show via You Tube – because I was surprised Jim Bakker was given more air time after he stole millions from so many and served in prison – but the world is an interesting place...so, I watch her speak of her theology of authority – and it is very different than my own and here is what she said:

“God places people in positions of authority, so if God has raised someone up, if we go against that, if we go against the hand of God, we go against the will of God. We were not sent here to fit in, we were sent here to take over. Jimmy said – hear that - that's the church! That's why

we have the president we have, he doesn't fit (as he was shaking his arms and pointing his finger. He is not a normal president. And here is a woman who is from the bottom lands and God has raised her up to the White house (in his yelling preacher voice). She has seen the valley of the shadow of death time and time again – and I have been shaken until my shoes have been shaken off and here we are. God is shaking again, God is shaking in American people – and its time, you better be ready for the harvest. We have to wake up America, we finally have a president ...”

and he went on to speak about he recommended this person for the presidency, why did I recommend people vote for Donald Trump, and I did that everyday – people wanted to hurt me and kill me – well, I have Jesus and I'm going to be with him, and I don't have my hope down here anymore...” Paula White then held up the pen that Jim Bakker had said to bring, it was the pen that Trump signed the executive order loosening the reins on the Johnson Amendment, which says clergy can talk about political candidates from the pulpit, assuming this means endorsing them, and, give money to them if they so desire. The church can endorse political people for office – not an amendment to the law, but instructions via executive order that affect the church and how we run

things, run our small businesses in the USA regarding our tax status, these instructions to the IRS are to relax and not pull the NFP status of the church because they dabble in the political atmosphere of the moment. I was jaw dropped at how differently the world is seen and experienced by all of us. I am okay with difference, and this is a fine line friends – I am not endorsing or not endorsing anyone from the pulpit – I won't do that – but they were. I will talk about justice issues that God gives me to talk about and through scripture we will visit them – but they were talking theocracy – with their version of Christianity branded with a big – AMEN! It is very different and does not feel just comfortable or irritating in a good way that says, wake up people – it does not sit just right. I am concerned – we are here to talk about faith and God and who we believe Christ to be to us, and as a citizens we are informed and we vote, and we talk about mercy and justice that Jesus participated in in the ancient of days and how it applies to life today - and we follow him – but not about specific people in specific offices, not from here, so, I interpret the gospels very differently, and this offended me, I actually felt sick and had to walk away... so I prayed, don't let me fall to the temptation of being a hater, don't let me fall to the temptation of being

a hater...because this stuff is offensive to me. Anybody else bothered by this stuff? Who do you say that I am – shall we say, humble authority? Not all would agree if that is what you think...

Who do you imagine, Jim Bakker or Paula White think that Jesus is? They are clearly claiming something that I find hard to comprehend from a theological and I confess, emotionally charged perspective because they are leaving you and me out! I hope and pray that what we profess, that all means all are welcome – you may have some differences with a person in the pew next to you, but we unite over Christ and so, who do you say that I am? and I am unsettled and seeking a path and a bit of comfort – who do you say that I am? At this moment and all the moments of confusion, I say you are the comforter in the chaos – even if the chaos is just in the mind. Or spills into the streets and sprays mace and carries clubs and screams hate like blood and soil, Jews won't replace us and N-bombs go home...this is hard on the heart because I say also, Jesus is mercy – and we have to work to let his mercy be known and it is only known through all of us in the body of Christ. We cannot manipulate Jesus – you would know the difference in one another – you know who is authentic and about love and who is not – we must remain

authentic to Christ because we have received his mercy, we are forgiven people, we are ushered by his love in this life and we seek that – so, who do we say he is?

We believe that the Holy Spirit is the presence of Jesus Christ among us. Through Him God loves us, empowers us and lives in us. The Spirit gives gifts to all believers. We believe in all the gifts of the Spirit and encourage their use. That is how we face the temptation for evil because it beckons with various seductions, in the past weeks, it has been obvious hatred – we will not respond with hate. We will rebuke evil, and behave with the love we have been given – we will serve in the food pantry, volunteer at the library, donate markers and crayons to elementary school, comfort the lonely and clothe the naked – we will love because he loved us first. Who do you say that I am? Who? When you can answer that for yourself, you will be able to respond to the haters, with authority and with your gifts. Write songs, march, link arms with the faithful, write letters to the newspaper and blog away – but do not sit still and pretend it is not real – evil is showing up again, and with love we take its power to be transformed by Him – who do you say that I am – the Transformer! Who?

Praise be to God, and Amen.

Please open your hymnal to the prayer for Unity and share it with me?

