

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle B
July 7, 2024

“Who do you think you are?” Ever heard that one? “Who do you think you are?” A disappointed parent or teacher... An angry coach... Or maybe an intemperate boss... Most of us have had this most uncomfortable of questions hurled at us at one point or another in our lives. “Who do you think you are?” A challenging question to be sure... Truth be told, we can sometimes “forget who we are.” Yes, we can sometimes “act out of character” or “lose our way.” Our identities can become muddled.

Our Gospel readings over the course of the last two weeks focus on faith, of course, but even more so on this essential question of identity, our sense of ourselves. Yes, “who do we think we are?” Who, indeed!

Recall last week’s Gospel reading from Mark. Two remarkable healings... Jairus’ 12-year-old daughter and the woman who had suffered so grievously from hemorrhages for more than a decade. Yes, Jairus and the suffering woman demonstrated remarkable faith. Most importantly, they had dared to ask Jesus for a healing.

What do these healings have to do with identity, our sense of ourselves? A lot in fact. Jairus was a synagogue official. He was educated. He enjoyed standing in the community. Indeed, he had likely achieved much in his life. But he put it all at risk when he asked Jesus to heal his daughter. You see, Jairus was a scribe and the scribes – like the pharisees – had rejected Jesus. In effect, Jairus was “taking sides” against his “own people,” against those on whom he depended for his livelihood and the high esteem in which he was certainly held by his friends and neighbors.

But here’s the thing. Jairus knew himself to be – first and foremost – a child of God, a beloved son of Israel. And he thought of his daughter as a beloved child of God, too. And more, Jairus recognized Jesus as a prophet, as one who was acting on God’s behalf. Jairus knew who he was, and he knew who Jesus was. Indeed, Jairus’ sense of himself made it possible for him to approach Jesus for the healing for which he so very much hoped.

The same is true of the woman who had for so long suffered from uncontrolled hemorrhages. She knew who she was, too. The rest of the world had reduced her to a medical condition. She was understood to be “unclean.” She knew in her heart of hearts, however, that she, too, was a beloved daughter of God. According to Jack Shea, a wonderful scripture scholar, the

woman had *“never been unclean...”* In her own mind, she was, instead, *“a beloved daughter of God who happened to be suffering. Despite everything, she held onto this identity, and this deeper sense of herself gave her the courage she needed to reach out for God’s love as it had manifest itself in the person of Jesus.”* According to Jack Shea, *“God’s love is for God’s children, and she was one of God’s children. This was her faith.”*

Jairus’ sense of himself and the suffering woman’s sense of herself as children of a loving God opened them to the possibility of healing in their lives. Their core identities made everything they hoped for possible.

Now fast forward to today’s Gospel reading. It’s about faith, too, or – more accurately – a clear lack of faith. Jesus visits his hometown and is invited to speak at his home synagogue, a great honor, a testament, in fact, to his growing celebrity. But what happens? Nothing. Nothing happens. Jesus’ hometown folks can’t imagine Jesus as anything more than a *“carpenter’s son.”* Unlike Jairus and unlike the suffering woman in last week’s Gospel, Jesus’ neighbors don’t recognize God’s presence in their lives. And as a result, we’re told *“he was not able to perform any mighty deed there, apart from curing a few sick people by laying his hands on them,”* likely, Mark suggests, because only these few sought Jesus out. He was, we’re told, *“amazed at their lack of faith.”*

A lack of faith, sure... But an impoverished sense of themselves as well. Our reading suggests a lack of imagination or maybe even an inferiority complex. Jesus’ neighbors may have internalized Nathaniel’s question to Phillip in John’s Gospel: *“What good can come from Nazareth?”* They may have forgotten that they were – first and foremost – sons and daughters of Israel, that they were – first and foremost – beloved sons and daughters of a loving and provident God.

And as a result, the good people of Nazareth were much like the people in need of a healing in the marketplace in last week’s Gospel reading, the good people in need of a healing who were bumping into Jesus and jostling him as he tried to make his way to Jairus’ house. Yes, many of them, too, were undoubtedly in need of healing. But it was only the suffering woman who truly reached out to Jesus, and it was the mere touch of his garment that effected a healing in her, a healing that would change the trajectory of her life.

How did this happen? Well, she knew who she was. The suffering woman knew herself to be a beloved child of God. And this sense of herself and her faith in a loving and provident God made everything possible.

Too many of us today anchor our sense of ourselves in something other than God. It may be our supposed accomplishments, what others think and say about us, or our possessions, perhaps, in what we may have acquired over the course of our lives. Truth be told, our sense of ourselves as beloved sons and daughters of a loving and provident God is muted today if it exists at all, at least in our culture.

But our Gospel readings this week and last week, too, tell a different story. Jairus and the woman who suffered so grievously from hemorrhages knew who they were. And they knew who God is as well: a loving creator who can make all things possible.

And so the question we face this weekend... “Who do we think we are?” Are we simply the sum total of our accomplishments or, perhaps, our disappointments and failures in life? Are we nothing more than what others may think and say about us? Or, perhaps, the sum total of the possessions that we happen to have acquired over time? And what might these identities – as passing and as truncated as they may be – mean in terms of our understanding of God? What might they mean in terms of what God can make possible in our lives, your life and mine?

Good questions to ponder, perhaps, over the course of the next week... Indeed, “who do we think we are?”