

Children of God

Who am I?

Who are you?

This is a question that has bothered me for most of my life. If you assign labels I am all of the following and more:

Daughter, Sister, Nana, Auntie, Grand-daughter, God-mother, white, Canadian, British Columbian, Fernie-ite, follower of Jesus, sober, Queer, Priest, Minister, addict, friend, confidante. And those don't include the mental and physical illness labels.

If you strip away all of the labels, what is left?

In my home Diocese of Huron in Southwestern Ontario, in order to be ordained you have to endure 14 weeks of Clinical Pastoral Education or CPE, which I did in 2007. One of my least favourite parts of it was when we did a weekly group supervision session with our Supervisor. He would choose one of the six students he was supervising and question them relentlessly. Sometimes it was about our childhood, or our personal life, sometimes it was about our faith or vocational journey.

On one of the days he chose me he started with "Andrea, who are you?" And I answered him with "Student". He said "Wrong". And then for the next two hours asked me over and over with every answer I gave being wrong. It was demeaning, frustrating and exhausting.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a 20th Century Theologian, scholar and pastor wrote a poem when he was in prison. It is called "Who Am I"

Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cells confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a Squire from his country house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I used to speak to my warders
Freely and friendly and clearly,
As though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me
I bore the days of misfortune
Equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one accustomed to win.

Am I then really that which other men tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat,
Yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds,
Thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness,
Tossing in expectations of great events,
Powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
Weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making,
Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all.

Who am I? This or the Other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
And before myself a contemptible woebegone weakling?
Or is something within me still like a beaten army
Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine!

© Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1945

Bonhoeffer wrote this only weeks before he was executed on the 9th of April 1945. Can any of you relate to his struggles? Are you the same person with your children as you are with your spouse? Are you the same person with your co-workers as you are with your friends?

Do you ever feel like an imposter? I have a hard time accepting compliments. When someone tells me I am a good preacher or a good presider I smile and say thank you. It's taken me years to learn this. I used to deflect the compliment, bat it away as though it was nothing.

In one of my night classes at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, the professor would choose one student each week and whenever he could, he would compliment them. When it was my turn he told me he liked my penmanship. I waved a hand at him and told him that it wasn't that great. Later, he told me he liked my answer to a question. I shrugged and said it was nothing. Still later, he told me he thought I was an excellent writer. Again, I batted away the compliment. He shouted at me. He actually raised his voice!

"Andrea, WHY can't you accept a compliment?" And then explained that a compliment was a gift; and that receiving one is as though being given a precious and delicate gift. When we deflect the compliment what we are doing is smashing that precious gift on the floor. I blinked back tears. "Why don't you like accepting compliments?" I quietly answered "Because I don't believe I deserve them".

He hugged me (after asking permission to do so) and gave the class a ten minute break.

When the class resumed I was composed and vowed to always remember the message he had given me, that a compliment is a delicate and priceless gift. Which is why my usual reply to a compliment is "thank you". It's the most honest thing I can say without deflecting or rejecting the gift.

The first letter of John resonates with me. John writes "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." (1 John 3.1, NRSV) When we strip away all the labels society assigns us and we strip away the labels we apply to ourselves, that is all that is left. When we remove the armour that we use to defend ourselves in what can seem to be a cruel world; when we strip away our flesh and bone, what is left is that we are God's children.

And not only are we God's children, but so is everyone we encounter. John writes, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." (1 John 3.2, NRSV) Have you ever had someone look at you and see, not through you, but into you? Deep into the very core of you?

There is no experience that compares to it and it is also exceedingly rare. John is giving us **hope** in the midst of fear and uncertainty. He tells us that while we may not understand just who God is, in time God will be revealed to us and we will then know, through God, who we are.

It is similar to what the serpent told the Earthlings in the Garden of Eden. If they eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge they will not die, rather they will know what God knows. And when they ate the fruit and realised they were naked, they felt shame; something they had not felt before. They also felt shame because they knew God would find out. And when God did, they were ejected from paradise.

Through Jesus, humanity has been given another opportunity to know God. Yet this time, we are encouraged to seek God and to know God, deeply within ourselves. Quite different from what the Earthlings were told to do. We are not asked to accept blindly; rather we are encouraged to do what is right by moral and societal standards. John writes, "Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous." (1 John 3.7, NRSV)

We have it within ourselves to see the best in ourselves and to see the worst in ourselves. Therefore we also have it in ourselves to see the best and the worst in our neighbours and in the rest of humanity. When we make a separation such as dividing lines between who is and is not worthy, we cease doing what is righteous. As Archbishop Michael Curry says "if it is not of love, it is not of God."

And in case you're wondering what happened with my CPE Supervisor; at a moment of fury and frustration I threw my hands up and said "I don't care how many times you tell me I am wrong, I know I am a child of God." He said "Correct."

My Mam is turning 85 in August and I desperately want to celebrate her birthday with her in Ontario. I am holding onto hope that it may happen.

I am also contacting all the couples I am to marry this summer and ask if they want to proceed with a COVID restricted wedding or postpone...again.

What we know for certain is that we live in times that are uncertain. Time has taken on new meaning. It seems as though yesterday we were trying to figure this Zoom thing out, and today we have folks connecting with us from across B.C., Alberta, Ontario, Montana, Virginia, Texas, Florida and the United Kingdom. Today, especially, we are blessed to host our siblings from Windermere Valley Shared Ministry, the Worshipping Community of Golden and their Minister, the Reverend Brent Woodard and his lovely wife Sally.

While we lament the things we are missing, and rightly so; let us remember the joy we have found in the small things. There is more daylight. We have been experiencing lots of sunny days. New life is happening in the tiny buds that are appearing. Vaccination clinics are opening and people are getting vaccinated.

While we cannot see our loved ones in person, in many cases we can still see them through the wonder of video conferencing.

It may not be much; but it's something. And it is in those moments of doubt, fear and anger that we **must** celebrate the small things. And, of course, one large thing; the knowledge that we are all children of God.

Amen

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1 John 3.1-7
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