

Who Do You Think You Are?
Romans 6:1b-11
Matthew 10:24-39
June 25, 2017
Wauwatosa Avenue United Methodist Church
Rev. Tim Berlew

One day Arnold Palmer and Jesus were golfing. Arnold put his ball on the tee and drove it to a spot right near the pin on the green. It was Jesus' turn and he addressed the ball and sliced it onto a little island in the middle of a water hazard. Nonplussed, Jesus walked on the water to where the ball was. Arnold Palmer exclaimed, "Jesus, who do you think you are, Jack Nicklaus?"

Often, when we hear the words, "Who do you think you are?", they are spoken with derision when someone oversteps their boundaries. Paul was writing to the church in Rome. It was an established church, but not founded by Paul. His letter to the church was both a letter of introduction for himself because he wanted to visit, and a laying out of his theology. He gave them a view of his theology, not simply to say who he was, but to tell them who they were. The early church did not come with a rule book – other than the Hebrew scriptures, that is. The early Christians were feeling their way along, making many mistakes as they tried to define who they were as a new type of faith community.

Paul talks about baptism as that thing God does in us that forms us and grounds us. The symbolism is that, when we go under the water, we participate in Christ's death, when we come up out of the water, we participate in the resurrection. In our communion service, we always use the following Memorial Acclamation: "Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again." There are a few other options including, "Dying you destroyed our death; rising you restored our life; Lord Jesus, come in glory."

At the beginning of this reading, Paul says, "So what do we do? Keep on sinning so God can keep on forgiving? I should hope not!" Baptism or simply becoming a follower of Jesus takes us to a new place. I think Paul was teasing the Roman church. He had said, "Where there is sin, grace abounds." He asks the question here, "Do you really think you ought to sin more so you can get more grace?" Eugene Peterson translates the Greek words, *me genoito*, as "I should hope not!" In reality, it is stronger than that: it is "Heck, no!" or perhaps even stronger. He gets their attention and then talks about baptism.

We usually think about baptism primarily as a nice occasion with babies dressed in white, satiny outfits and pastors praying not to drop the wiggling infant – or at least for the baby not to scream too loudly. It is a specific moment in time for most of us. Baptism, however, is an ongoing thing for us. As followers of Jesus, we try to turn from

sin and do good. We also know that, although we are hopefully moving on *toward* perfection, we make mistakes. Paul tells us that our sin is nailed to the cross with Jesus. While we may slip up, sin no longer has to take over our lives. If we have died with Christ, we will also live with Christ.

Some of you may be saying, “But Tim, you don’t know the things I have done. You don’t know how easy it is for me to hurt others.” This isn’t about what you have done. It’s about what Jesus already did. Our God is a God of fresh starts. We have the ability to make fresh starts every day. No matter what you have done, today is a new day – a day to take a step forward into becoming the new creation in Christ of which Paul speaks.

On the second Sunday in January, we generally celebrate the Baptism of Jesus with a renewal of baptismal vows. In the confirmation and ordination services, we also say, “Remember your baptism and be thankful.” In the study we did on forgiveness this past Lent, Barbara Crafton suggested remembering our baptism every time we take a shower. As the water cascades down on you, so God’s rains down on you making you clean and fresh and free. The next time you take a shower, remember your baptism and be thankful. It is a reminder of the new creation you are becoming.

Today’s gospel passage is troubling for many. Jesus talks about bringing division and unrest. He, too, is telling the young Christian community who they are. Vince Price (yes, his parents named him Vincent Price), is the new president of Duke University. Prior to that, he was the provost at the University of Pennsylvania where he started the campaign for community. In this program, students are encouraged to actively seek out people with differing viewpoints – to seek out disagreement and then to talk about it. Price’s point is, “You cannot go from a state of not knowing something to knowing it without going through a state of confusion. So, you should embrace confusion.” He says that this is a type of dialogue that requires practice. If confusion leads to knowledge, we United Methodists are going to know a lot as we work through our issues around sexual orientation and gender identity!

Jesus point is saying that he will come between parents and children and brothers and sisters is all about priorities. Is being a follower of Jesus and living a Christ-like life a priority for you? Is daily remembering your baptism, becoming a new creation, and moving on to perfection in love (to use Wesley’s terminology) important to you? If so, other relationships will fall into place.

The truth is, what happened in the past is the past. Today is a fresh start, a chance to move in a positive direction. Holding on is the opposite of living into your baptism. The question is, “Who do you think you are?”

Najwa Zebian is a young Muslim poet. She teaches high school kids in Ontario. Her poetry is sensitive and beautiful. She wrote a poem entitled "Who Do You Think You Are?" and I would like to read it now.

Who Do You Think You Are?

Najwa Zebian

Let them paint you with whatever brush they like
The colors that they spill on you speak of them, not you
They cannot taint you, no, you are your own masterpiece
Let your light shine with or without their opinion of you
Let your voice roar whether they do or do not listen to you
Resist even through your silence
Time will make their dark hearts rust, but not your heart, no
Keep it soft, keep it kind
It's light will make this world witness
 that what's rotten starts to stink after a while
and what's golden always shines
My darling, you are golden.
You do not deserve less than gold,
so promise yourself today not to accept anything less

Remember, because of your baptism you share in the death and resurrection of Christ. Because of who you are, "You are golden. You do not deserve less than gold, so promise yourself today not to accept anything less.