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**“Are You the One?” –
Part I – How Do We Know If It’s God or Not?**

(Mat 11:2-6 NRSV) When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" 4 Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. 6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

Ever since the change in security rules at airports that keep non-ticketed folks from going to the gates to greet folks arriving, every airport now seems to have a cadre of folks at baggage claim who are always holding up signs with the names of folks on them that they are there to greet and transport to this or that hotel. In the Springs, it’s often for those going to the Broadmoor; in Honolulu, it was employees of package tours waiting to take their guests to their Waikiki hotel. At the Honolulu airport, these greeters stand at the bottom of the escalator, one arm bedecked with leis the other arm waving that sign on which is written the name of the person or couple.

About a few years ago, I watched as one of these Honolulu greeters went up to a couple said *“Mr. and Mrs. Jones?”* And they said, *“Yes, we’re the Jones’.”* He then proceeded to put a lei on each one of them, giving Mrs. Jones an embrace and kiss on the cheek that seemed to startle her (after all, generally in most other parts of the United States, you bring out your Mace when a stranger in the airport tries to kiss you). He then went on to give them their guidebook and then said to them, *“Well, once we find your luggage, I’ll help you get it to the bus that is parked right over there.”* *“Great,”* they responded. Then he said, *“And don’t forget that tomorrow morning we have an orientation breakfast that’s free.”* Again, they responded, *“Great!”* And he continued, *“The breakfast is just a couple of blocks away from the Sheraton; that’s a really great hotel and you’ll enjoy yourselves.”* The husband then responded, *“The Sheraton? Is*

that the same as the Ohana Maile hotel? That's where we're staying." The guide responded, *"Well, my records indicate that you're staying at the Sheraton."* "No," responded the man, *"I wish we were but our budget couldn't afford that."* The guide looked very puzzled and said *"There must be some mixup. You're Tommy and Susan Jones, right?"* "No, we're Frank and Linda Jones." "Oh, I am so sorry," the greeter said. He then proceeded to take their leis off of them, take his guidebook back, shook their hands, apologized again, and wandered off looking for some other Jones's who might be intently looking for someone who was intently looking for him and his sign. Finally, another couple indicated by their gestures that they were the Jones'. And the greeter went up to them and said *"Aloha! Are you the **right** Jones?"* They looked very puzzled.

It was in the Judean desert and not the Colorado Springs or Honolulu airports, and it was two thousand years ago, but it's the very same question that John the Baptist was asking of Jesus. **Are you the one?** Are you the **right** one? It's not as odd a question as it appears, and the very fact that the gospels record it and passed it along means two things: first, it likely really did happen in pretty much the way that it did, because – think about it – if you and I were writing a story that was meant to be flattering of Jesus we might not want to include a story where someone questions whether he really is who he says he is. But more importantly, it hints to us something about the milieu into which Jesus came. For it was a time, we know from other historical records in the first century, of many, many wandering healers and miracle workers. There were so many, in fact, that scholars have given a name to stories about such folks: Divine Men stories. And now Jesus, newly arrived on the scene, is also a wandering preacher, performing miracles and doing healings. And John is a bit jaded. "Go ask him," John told his disciples, "if he really is the one that God has promised? Ask him if he is the right one." For you see, in the day there were, as I say, many

claimants to being the messiah. Some thought and preached that God was going to work through them to bring a mighty and spectacular and violent overthrow to the hated Romans. Others preached that they were the Messiah, the long-expected savior, but that the Kingdom would come only at the end of time. Other would-be messiahs, perhaps more practical, taught that the best they could hope for was to accommodate the Romans and try to stay out of their way and hope that it would work out. Parties and followers gathered after each successive Divine Man, and each had their day, but then each faded. So no wonder John was jaded: “Are you the one who is to come? Are you the right one?” Or shall we wait for yet another?

Now, it’s very interesting how Jesus answered the questions that John’s disciples brought to him. And think about it: how would YOU prove that you are who you say you are if somebody questioned that? You might show them your i.d. If the person had known you, you might recite for them some details of your life that the other person would know and presumably not everyone would. Or let’s up the ante a little. Suppose someone was questioning not just whether you really who you say you are, but questioning whether you know what you’re talking about. I suppose you could give references or demonstrate somehow that you indeed knew your stuff. But Jesus does none of these things in response to John’s question. He didn’t cite the rabbis he’d studied under, he didn’t talk about how his birth seemingly fulfilled prophecies from the Hebrew scriptures, he didn’t give them a resumé and suggest they contact his references. No, he simply said this: *“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”* In other words – and this is crucial – Jesus turns John’s question right back at him and says, in essence, *“Given what is happening by me and through me, you decide: **Is God at work here or not?** Am I the one you are expecting, or not?”* I sometimes find it very annoying when a

question gets answered with another question; I know that Barbara does when I do it to her: “Love,” she says, “*where would you like to go for dinner?*” “*I don’t know; where would you like to go?*” You can spend an entire day doing that and you never do make it out to eat. And yet, Jesus isn’t simply trying to be difficult or coy or certainly annoying here, for the question he turns back at John is the key question for John’s life and for every Christian, for every one of us: ***Do you see God at work in me or not?*** Is God at work in this or that teaching? Is this or that claim about the way things are and should be from God or is it contrary to a God of unconditional love and justice? These are the questions that each of us are confronted with every day as we try our best to walk with Jesus and to follow God’s path.

Because, you see, Jesus turns the question back on us too: “What do YOU see?” When our son Andrew was about 18 months old, I decided that it was time for me to get a real, grown-up haircut. It was about time since I was almost 30 years old, don’t you think? I hope that Barbara never shows you any pictures of me from my teens or twenties when I had more hair than good sense. I came home from the long-overdue real haircut and Andrew saw me and said in a very tremulous and tentative and almost fearful voice: “*Daddy????*” If an eighteen-month-old could have put it this way, he might have been saying “*Are you my daddy or shall I wait for another?*” Now, think about this: how would he have become assured that indeed I really was his Daddy, and not some short-haired stranger? My i.d. wouldn’t mean much to him. I couldn’t tell him stories from our shared past. But I could act like he knew his Daddy acted; I could do the sort of things he knew his Daddy did. If, on the other hand, I suddenly no longer made silly jokes, or no longer played with him, or no longer yelled at him for smearing the underside of the kitchen counters with peanut butter, then he might have concluded that I was not, in fact, the right one but that he should wait for another.

And so it is with Jesus. Jesus says to John: *“Am I acting like someone from God or not? Look at what is happening around me and through me.”* And then he lists the sort of things that he is accomplishing: folks are healed of what is ailing and crippling them, folks who were blinded by something in their lives were made to see, folks who were hurting and oppressed were freed and liberated and transformed. The theological point here is that one who claims to act on behalf of God, to speak on behalf of God, who claims to know things on behalf of God will speak and do in ways that indeed manifest a God who is passionately concerned that people live lives that are not blinded by false conceptions, that are not oppressed by actions – whether their own or those of other people – that make their lives less than they could be, that are made whole wherever they are stunted.

And that, my friends, is the theological point for us. Whenever you and I are faced with someone claiming to speak for God, claiming to know the mind of God, claiming to be acting the way God would act, then the question we must put to them – and the things we must look for – is whether or not their words display a God of infinite care and love and whether their actions show a disdain or disregard for any one in God’s creation. Our story today is a reminder to us to always be ready to question those who would teach us about God and claim authority for their teaching. It is a reminder to us that we are responsible for our faith, that indeed we are always responsible for asking the question of any person, any claim, any experience *“Is that you, God, or is that something claiming to be You that’s really not?”* We can’t evade the responsibility, for all around us there will always be folks who are claiming to do God’s work. And our response to them ought to be the same as Jesus’: where healing and wholeness and hope are offered for each and all, then indeed God is at work in those places. But where we do not see those things, then this is not “the right one,” this is not “the One who is to come.”

Even the way that scripture gets used can sometimes disguise God instead of show forth God, because it does not, indeed, show forth those criteria that Jesus offered. Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, was never shy about offering his opinions and he made a very similar point about the Bible once, even if it may sound startling to our ears at first blush. He said that the Bible is not itself the word of God, rather it **contains** the Word of God. His homey analogy was that cradle is not the baby; the cradle contains the baby. And how does one know where scripture – or the use to which scripture is being put by someone – contains the Word of God or is in fact something else, “another one,” entirely? Luther’s answer was simple: of any use or interpretation of scripture, we must always ask “Do we see Christ here?” It’s not as abstract as it may sound. For you and I have all heard preachers who tend to use the scriptures to exclude and to damn, instead of to love and offer grace and reconciliation and healing and liberation. You and I have all heard all kinds of evil cloaked under the mantle of the Bible. Scores of statutes in the South before the civil war actually invoked the scriptures to “justify” slavery. We have all heard the scripture used to “prove” that some of God’s children are not really and fully first-class citizens of the Kingdom on account of their race or ethnicity or gender or orientation.

So again we ask, how do we respond to such things, such uses of scripture? In the way that Luther suggests, by saying “This is not the Christ.” For, after all, consider the way that Jesus himself described the opening of his ministry on his first public occasion as recorded in Luke’s gospel: “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor*” (Luke 4:18-19 NRSV). Jesus himself gives us the criteria to answer the question as to whether any use or interpretation of scripture is Christ-like: if the interpretation or teaching is consistent with the God of unconditional love, the God

of healing and liberation, the God of gentleness and hope, then such teachings, such interpretations, indeed are from God, indeed show forth Christ. They are indeed, to revert to our earlier imagery, “the right one.”

Now there is more that I want and I think need to say on this topic, so I want to continue it next week, for it is the most vexing topic in many ways of any Christian’s life: how do we know when something is of God or not? And next week I want to offer three simple tests for trying to answer that question. But for now, let us conclude in this way: In the midst of all the claims that the world shouts at us about God, those questions – *“Are you the right one? Is this really of God?”* – is one we must continually ask if we are to grow in our faith and be even better disciples. And through all that din, all those claims, all the sometimes noisy rantings of the world around us, the answer we should listen for comes from exactly the same place that Jesus’ answer to John came from: Where people are made whole, where people are loved and valued, where people are liberated from anything that chains them, then there the Gospel is truly communicated and preached and lived out. But where we do not find these things, then it is not God at work, it is not “the one who is to come,” and we should indeed look for another – because Christ wouldn’t and doesn’t act that way! But where these things **are** found, then let us praise God the who has indeed sent “the right one,” the one who offers to us and the whole world with the lure of life abundant, the promise of hope eternal, the blessing of amazing grace.