

**Proper 16 A August 27, 2017**

**Answering Questions**

**The Rev. Deborah Woolsey**

**Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio**

Episcopal priest, author, preacher, and workshop leader Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story about a woman who left her church after the service one Sunday morning and found a man standing outside the building, looking up at the cross on top of the church steeple, like we have cross on top of our steeple. The woman greeted the man politely, and was surprised when he turned to her, pointed to her church building and asked, "What is it you believe in there?" Even though it was an unexpected question, the woman tried her best to answer it, but soon realized she was just repeating words she had heard or said, and in truth, she didn't know how to answer the man's question for herself. After listening politely, the man, who clearly didn't understand what she said, apologized for bothering the woman and walked away.

Because of our location here in the heart of Ohio University, perhaps we can relate a little bit to the woman in Barbara Brown Taylor's story. Last year, on the first day of classes, those of us who got up early to offer free coffee and donuts to students and faculty as a way to wish them a good start to a new academic year also ended up fielding questions about our identity and how that related to our beliefs. I remember one young woman who stopped, skeptically eyed our fresh donuts, the sugar glazing glistening as only sugar can in the early morning sunlight, the smell wafting deliciously out of the box, and said, to the box of donuts as much to us, "You can't make me change my church."

We were all quick to say that is not what we are about. We weren't trying to bribe anyone to church with our coffee and donuts.

So she took one. And as she bit into its soft sweetness, she asked what kind of a church we are. Episcopal, we answered. What's that? She asked, because believe it or not, there are lots of people who have never heard of the Episcopal Church. Unlike the woman in Barbara Brown Taylor's story, we tried hard to explain what we are; some of us doctrinally, some of us historically, some of the volunteers gave up and looked expectantly to me. The young woman who wouldn't be bought with a donut ended up listening to our attempts to explain who we are and in the end walked away commenting on how she had learned about a denomination she had been unaware of, and felt the experience was, in her words, "cool."

That encounter is just one of the reasons I am looking forward to being outside on the front steps again starting tomorrow morning, on the first two days of classes giving away coffee and donuts. Because it is both an opportunity to show what we believe: that God is here and loves all people by our action of being present in the

midst of a new academic year, giving away coffee and donuts as a form of blessing and well wishes and because it is an opportunity to engage in questions the curious who pause long enough might ask. Not because this is some sort of fun, pop quiz show, but because it is an opportunity very much like Jesus' disciples experienced when, as we heard in our Gospel today, Jesus took them away from the bustle of crowds and the work of ministry to ask them two questions about his identity. He asked who the people were saying he was and he asked who the disciples were saying he was.

We heard from their answers the people had lots of things to say about him. Today it seems wherever we look, people have opinions they are not afraid to share, and it seems this was just as true in Jesus' day as it is in ours. Even today lots of people have lots of opinions about Jesus; some say he was a historical figure, a teacher, a prophet, a wise man, a miracle worker, a hero.

But having an opinion about Jesus is not the same thing as following Jesus, or walking with Jesus. Which may be why Jesus asked his disciples who they were saying he was. And Peter answered that question with words both powerful and grand. Words that sound rather religious too. "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Scholars and commentators have a lot to say about Peter's words. Some feel they could never make so bold a confession as Peter. Some are quick to say his rise to Jesus' favor will crash before this chapter in Matthew is complete, and we'll hear what they are talking about when we hear the rest of the story next Sunday. Folks have a lot of opinions about what Peter said, just like there are lots of opinions about Jesus. But perhaps trying to dissect Peter's words is too convenient a way to ignore why Jesus seemed so pleased to hear what Peter had to say.

Did you notice Jesus did not praise Peter for being clever or intelligent? This doesn't seem to be a test Jesus was giving to see if his disciples have been paying attention. This doesn't seem to be about intellectual knowing, like knowing the answer to a history test, but the spiritual kind of knowing or recognizing what is in their midst. Jesus told Peter outright that recognizing Jesus as the Son of God wasn't Peter's accomplishment, it was something that was possible because of Peter's closeness to God through Jesus. It was that relationship, that focus on God that helped Peter recognize the holy in his midst. It was this perspective Jesus went on to praise, the very reason why he gave Peter a new name and a new identity, symbolizing the rock or foundation the church is built on. It isn't a rock of correct religious answers, it is a rock that is open to recognizing God at work because of being in relationship with God. And it is that focus on God that is the key to the kingdom, the key to seeing the kingdom of God in any moment of any day in any place.

So, perhaps it is misguided to try and analyze Peter's words doctrinally, or historically, or compare them to how we might answer Jesus if we were asked the same question. Perhaps the opportunity today's Gospel lesson offers us is to see what can happen when we focus not on the opinions of others, but on Christ himself, on what he did, what he said, how he responded to the various events we read in the Gospels, and when we have such focus we might discover God With Us, at work in the world about us, as we say in the Eucharistic Prayer.

This more than words approach is what may have been lacking in the story Barbara Brown Taylor told about a woman who didn't know the words to use because she didn't know how to answer a man who asked what she believed. It was this something more than words that kept us engaged with the young woman who asked us to describe the Episcopal Church. That something more is God with us, it was our intention to show the love of God in Christ in action, no matter how perfect or imperfect our attempt, and that may be why the young woman left feeling she had experienced something positive, perhaps something she saw as holy.

Perhaps the answer to Jesus' question is the same way to answer the man in Barbara Brown Taylor's story: to show how we see God in the world by what we do and let that inform the words we say. Like how we believe God is present with the lonely, the sick and suffering, and the new babies and those going through transitions in their lives; because that is the reason why knitters in this parish gather regularly to knit beautiful prayer shawls I have had the honor to bless. And how we believe in Jesus' example of God's love that feeds the hungry by feeding a free lunch to whomever comes in our doors at noon every Wednesday. And how we believe no one is beyond the reach of God's love, forgiveness and redemption by our support of the KAIROS prison ministry to the Hocking Valley Correctional Facility. How we believe in the importance of welcome and fellowship, such as Jesus shared with his disciples, and our coffee hour volunteers provide for us every Sunday after the service. How we believe worship is essential to our relationship with God by how our altar guild, acolytes, lay eucharistic leaders, and choir members show in their dedication to make every worship service a beautiful one.

And, how we believe we are called to be a welcoming, inclusive, Episcopal presence here in the heart of Ohio University by giving away coffee and donuts and by opening the doors of our chapel in order to offer a place of peace and rest to our neighbors.

There are many ways we already answer the question of what we believe, and as we look at new opportunities such as forming a friendship with St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Mexico and partnering with the diocese to build a micro enterprise, a way to help provide a place for training and employment while also being our welcoming,

inclusive parish showing God's love in the midst of OU's campus, perhaps we see these as more ways to embody the love of God with us, calling us to show the world God is here, God is love, and there is hope for us all. So perhaps when we are asked what the Episcopal Church is, we can answer with our hearts as well as our heads, showing how we recognize God is here.