



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

How do you know who you are?

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

September 23, 2012

What a curious bit of synchronicity we have today – a reading from Proverbs that is an ode to “the capable wife.” I don’t know that I’ve ever heard this read in church before; I only picked it because I really didn’t like the other choices from the Old Testament that are provided for this week. And then, the news hit the airwaves about the little scrap of seemingly authentic papyrus from the 4th century. It is smaller than a business card, has 8 lines of text on it, and alludes to Jesus’ referring to “my wife” and that “she will be able to be my disciple.” There are all sorts of things being said and pondered about what this might mean. What if Jesus were married?

The papyrus an intriguing bit of writing that at least indicates that the question of Jesus' marital status is not a new one – it was around long before *The DaVinci Code*. One reason for such curiosity is that there is no tradition of celibacy within Judaism; everyone was, if not expected, certainly encouraged to marry. There were ritual times of abstinence for priests serving in the Temple, but when those periods of service were over, one was free to go home and enjoy the marriage bed. However, there is no indication in any of the accepted writings that Jesus had a wife, unless one wonders whether the wedding at Cana, was Jesus' wedding. Why else would the servants come to Mary when they ran out of wine - that's the last thing you want a guest to know. Just sayin!

But we are now all contemplating what it might mean if he did have a wife. Most of the questions focus on what this might mean for church teachings, doctrine and traditions. But I'm more curious about her. What would she be like, this Mrs. Jesus? She'd probably look like this reading from Proverbs; "far more precious than jewels, up before dawn to start cooking, planting a vineyard, making a profit on her handicrafts, taking care of the poor, speaking wisely, raising happy children, praised in the city gates." But despite being this paragon, Jesus' wife probably also would have felt a fair measure of pressure, fear, and several other conflicting emotions. How difficult to know exactly how to share him with the world. How challenging to overcome the fear of what others might do to him every time he visited a new town or region. If they were married before he began his public ministry, how might their marriage been affected by the changes he experienced along the way? Would there have been enough time for her, or sufficient focus on their marital relationship, as Jesus was drawn more and more into his ministry and concern for virtually everyone he encountered.

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The thought that has continually to come to me is would she ever have been known as anything other than Mrs. Jesus - someone's wife? Would anyone want to know anything about her as a person and not just as the one who knew him best? Actually, this isn't just a problem for Mrs. Jesus. How are any of us known? We are known from early on by who are parents are, later we are known by the group of friends we hang out with, by the school we attend, by our work. For a long time, women had no identity of their own; they were someone's wife, someone's mother with little thought to their own identity outside of those roles - even those of us who were brought up to believe that we could do anything we wanted. I remember when my kids were young, but starting school, no longer toddlers, I had moments of panic, who would I be when I was no longer Mommy – the center of some little person's world? I could have put off that uncomfortable question for another few years by having another baby but I knew that sooner or later, I would still have to answer the question. Uncertainty about who I am was not a reason to keep having children. Thank heaven for that bit of wisdom!

I have heard enough stories of men who eagerly anticipate retirement only to discover that it throws them into an uncomfortable place. It's not just having unaccustomed time on their hands, it is more profound and existential. If you've been a lawyer or teacher or truck driver for most of your life, who are you when you are not that job any more?

Learning who we are is the work of a lifetime, work for which we are not given much help by the world around us. Messages from American culture tell us that we are what we drive, what we own, the manner in which we live – gated community or barrio. We draw identity from our politics, from our level of education and from our religious denominational affiliation or lack thereof. In all of these things we separate ourselves from some other group. I believe that many of the intractable cultural divisions, Arabs and Jews, Greeks and Turks, Serbs and Croats, Irish Catholics and Protestants, liberals and conservatives, are in part held in place because we know who we are by who our adversary is. It's as if some people don't know who they are if they don't have someone to hate or fear and isn't that sad? What a helpless way to know oneself.

In the amazing readings that we heard last Good Friday – if you can, think back for a moment to Diane's wonderful portrayal of the mother of Jesus. She said that the greatest gift she had received from her son was when he set her free from being his mother; he freed her from how the world knew her and how she had always known herself, so that she could be who she truly was—a disciple. A disciple isn't just a follower of a personality or teachings. A disciple of the Christ, the cosmic Christ, has stripped away all of the stuff of the ego, peeled off the labels, scraped away the paint of traditional identity and has exposed the true self. A disciple is someone who is in touch with his or her true identity.

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The true self is what Jesus exemplifies in redeemed humanity. I don't mean that in the sense of redeemed from original sin but redeemed from the less than complete ways in which we have known ourselves. We have believed for too long in our limitations. In today's Gospel, Jesus points to a little child and says that that's how we need to be. A child does not know limitation until someone tells her that she cannot do something, that he is not the completely amazing person that Jesus knows him to be. A child is born not knowing that he is separate from all creation—she has to learn that from the hardship of surviving in a demanding world. To be a disciple is to unlearn our sense of limitation. What you are in your true self is a part of all that is. As the most conscious parts of God's creation, you are powerful beyond your imagination. You have simply lost the ability to know how to use who you are as a part of the original idea straight from the mind of God. God's creative, live giving force is in you, it is you. This is what I mean when I tell you that you are a spiritual being having a human experience. As long as you let the human experience define you, as long as it is all that you know about yourself, you are missing the point of you.

You are an expression of the divine potential that is the image of God. This is what Jesus gives to us – the chance to know who we truly are, unlimited, loving, courageous, eternal beings. When you bring that knowledge of yourself into bloom, it will bring its power into your life; all that is unimportant will be just that; all that you do will be full of meaning, you will see the world and everyone in it, differently, not to be feared but to be loved. I don't know about you, but I work every moment to know that that's who I am.

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