

Sunday, August 27, 2017 – Whoever You Say I Am
The Rev. Dr. Barbara E. Davis
Romans 12:1-8
Matthew 16:13-20

When I was in elementary school my one great love was football. I collected football cards and stickers and those little plastic helmets of NFL teams that you could get in the machines by the exit of department stores. I watched college and NFL games constantly over the weekends, and my love for playing the game itself led to endless hours outside kicking, punting, chasing and throwing the football to myself. I had a game where I could cover the thirty yards or so of our yard in three throws to myself, usually requiring arms out-stretched for a diving grass stained catch. My competitive team play was limited to school recess. One particularly memorable recess, I lined up against one of the opposing team's top receivers. I got a good look at a short screen pass and I lunged in front of it at full speed. It was the kind of interception one can only dream about, there was no one between me and the swing sets that marked my end zone. That touchdown was in the sixth grade.

My reverie about this story at home, led to a serious conversation from my mom about how I wasn't always going to be able to play with the boys this way. Things were going to change. Confused and devastated, my mind ran wild with thoughts of the scary transformations my body was apparently going to go through that would make all my joys of my childhood disappear. I became determined to resist. ☐ I was familiar with my identity of being a so-called "tomboy" but I wasn't sure at all of what this next stage of transformation was going to bring.

I began thinking about my gender story and the significant moments in that journey over the summer. The thirty plus years since that touchdown have included a lot more confusion, awareness and resistance. I wrote on Friday in First Matters about when I was traveling this summer, one of the books I threw in my carry-on was [This Is My Body: Hearing the Theology of Transgender Christians](#) edited by Christina Beardsley and Michelle O'Brien. Our LGBTQ program, led by Elder Ben Maddox, recommended this book to us all for the summer. The topics in the book will be the focus of a three part discussion series in September.

While the first half of this book is more scholarly and the second half comprised of personal stories, I ended up appreciating how adept all the writers were at weaving the question "What does this have to do with my faith?" into the milestones of transitions in their journeys.

One of my favorite parts of the book was one of the appendixes in the back, written by a woman named Michelle Le Morvan, who has since passed away. In this appendix, she highlights five aspects of her spiritual path that have been present with her. She emphasizes they are not chronological but rather interwoven. The aspects she identifies are: awareness, acceptance, surrender, gratitude, and love. As she describes each of these aspects and then considers them as a whole path, she identifies how helpful they were to help her move away from the judgmental aspects of her faith practice that were constantly making her seek approval. As she embraced awareness, acceptance, surrender, gratitude, and love, she was able to live more freely into what she describes as the freedom of the Gospel. We can all identify moments where these very ideas have turned us down one path or another on our spiritual journey.

We talk too seldom about the stories of trans people, intersex people, and gender non-conforming friends. So little do we discuss and listen to their stories in fact, we miss a whole level of complexity in our own identities and our own spiritual journeys.

I find that I am still awkward with language in this conversation. Wrestling with these stories and with this vocabulary causes us to wrestle with restrictive ideas of embodiment and gender binaries in critical ways and it can make each of us more compassionate. If we looked closely at our own gender stories, we see places and people that challenged us in new ways, both inside and outside the cultural norms. One of the most powerful experiences for me in reading *This Is My Body*, was how articulate many of the writers are about a desire for dialogue that understands gender as something more fluid and less about fitting into categories of male and female. That emphasis was so different than expressing either one gender binary or another. Chris Dowd, in his article, “Five things cis folk don't know about trans folk because it wasn't on trashy TV - my right of reply,” one of the ideas he explores is the assumption that trans folk change gender. That for many trans people they have never seen themselves as cisgender, or perceived as the gender to which they were born, but rather as “contributing to a unique perspective on the dynamics of gender” (103).

The challenges we face by hearing trans people share their stories and link those stories with their spirituality is that we also have to hear the pain that restrictive interpretations of scripture have caused. For example, too often the creation story in Genesis 1:27 is used to suggest that God created human beings as “male or female” - that one or the other harms trans and gender non-conforming identities, and misses the God who is created male AND female, embracing a God who is the image of both and all the dynamic flow in between (O'Brien, *This is My Body*, p. 48).

These texts have been used to cause harm and that sadness is something we should hold with trans people and not try to make excuses or interpret them away. Re-interpreting these texts is also important, but I want to suggest today that we go a step further. It is a step that Will, Nicole and Ben and I have discussed a lot in our conversations about the discussion series about this book. What if we look at texts like the ones we heard today and juxtapose these with questions related to spiritual aspects of trans folks' journeys? What could we learn by considering what our faith stories share about identity transitions? Could we learn something new about ourselves and our discipleship?

The stories our (tradition) tells us over and over again that identity issues are important. The passage from Matthew's gospel community that Will read for us this morning is yet another great example. I love this dialogue between Jesus and the disciples. First of all, Jesus is up to his usual word parsing shenanigans when he asks them, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” He doesn't lead with asking them the straightforward question about who people say he is! Their answers reflect this distance from him - Elijah, John the Baptist... they don't say “You are!” But what I love about this question is that this is a question about presentation! What does the Son of Man look like? What is their name?

Hearing the disciples' answers, Jesus then shifts right into the crux of the gospels biggest identity question, who is he? He asks them, “what about you? Who do you say that I am?” He doesn't ask, “who do you say the Son of Man is?” He shifts - who do you say that I am? He gives them the answer - he is the Son of Man - do they know it? I love Peter's answer, but I wish Jesus' response wasn't all about Peter. Or maybe I wish Peter had asked Jesus, “who do you say you are?” All the gospel communities worked hard and in various ways to address the issues of Jesus' identity. Mostly his human/divine identity, but also his relationship to his Judaism (his cultural identity), his class, his education (how did you know how to teach in the synagogues the way he did?), his family roots (who are his mother, his brothers...) It would have been great to hear him articulate who he was.

Jesus seems to be affirming Peter's perception of who he is, but then he does this curious thing, you heard Will say it - he orders the disciples not to tell anyone who he is. I understand Jesus' caution, yet when I think about that silence in relation to the stories of trans people we've been talking about today, I feel sad. I think we've come to hear Jesus' silencing his disciples as a kind of humility or an intimate knowledge that he knew when things were supposed to happen, but we brush this hiding away too quickly. Doing so allows us to miss an important part of Jesus' identity transformation. Jesus has to wrestle with how to hide who he is. Jesus had to wrestle with how people perceive him and how he presents himself. Jesus has to wrestle with how he says who he is.

The issue of hiding and calling out assumptions is a significant aspect of sexual identity and gender identity, especially for those who do not fit into heteronormative and gender normative categories. One of the obvious and yet thought-provoking parts of the stories in Chris Dowd's article that I've been highlighting today, is this beautiful paragraph about the people he interviewed: "The people I met and interviewed were not gender rebels. They did not want to overturn binary gender, create radical theology or challenge church systems and structures. They simply wanted to be unremarkable people worshipping quietly in church communities which valued them as fellow Christians. Their greatest ambition was to blend in, not stand out."

That desire to blend in sounds a lot like what Jesus was dealing with in this story about his identity. Hearing these gospel stories in conjunction with gender stories, helps us hold the individuality and the universality of all these stories more fully. Jesus will eventually have to stand out. Our goal might be to stand with our trans Christian friends in a way that embraces them, whether they want to stand out or blend in.

When we begin to really hear the stories of trans people, we can't help but be challenged to think about our own identities in new ways. In doing so, we learn more about ourselves and our gifts, and more about others and their gifts. Even if we are clunky with our language, as I'm sure I have been today, the exploration gives us a chance to learn more, to be more articulate and more compassionate.

In Jesus' story we see those aspects of the spiritual path and how he navigates them. The truth of the matter is, we all know the experience of feeling lost to ourselves and having to re-orient who we are and how people perceive us. We struggle with depression and addiction, we feel guilty when our expectations of ourselves and from others stifle us. We seek approval and answers instead of singing our song. Our trans siblings in our faith have a lot to teach us, and we can share in the knowledge that awareness, assurance, surrender, gratitude and love will carry us a long way, whoever we are.

Michelle Le Morgan, who I mentioned earlier, used this quote from Anthony de Mello as her closing and it sums up the interactions in our journey of discipleship in a beautiful way:

"I am satisfied to do my thing, to dance my dance...and have done with it.
According to a sentence I read somewhere,
'A bird does not sing because it has an answer.
It sings because it has a song.'
I am content to sing my song."