

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost 16, September 16, 2012, dedicated to Helen Spears, who has been a friend to all and faithful member of First Church for 31 years as she moves to a new home in Atlanta, to Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens, Sean Smith, Tyrone Woods and Glen Doherty, murdered this past week in Benghazi, Libya, to all men and women serving our nation abroad, and always to the glory of God!

“Who Are You, Jesus?”

James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Sometimes our most significant understandings of “who we are” and why we are here happen far from home. In a distant land, in a place we never believe we can and will call home, in place where no one knows who we are and frankly no one really seems to care about us, we wake each day and lie awake each night struggling with our self-identity, our self-understand and our purpose in a seemingly strange and foreign land. This feeling may go on for a while. It may resolve itself in the flash of an eye. But it is there and it is deep.

And although it could happen half-a-world-away, it could just as easily happen on a dark night of the soul in Columbus, Ohio.

Then something happens – perhaps an encounter with someone, a vision of something greater than ourselves, a conversation with God or another person who represents the spirit of God to us and we begin to discover who we are, what our purpose

is, and why God has uniquely and purposefully created us for this time, for this place and these people. It is an awakening. We step outside our normal tribal understanding of who we are and step into an understanding in which we become transformed and we become a transformer for others.

I was thinking about such places and times in life as I pondered and prayed about the attack on the American Embassy in Benghazi, Libya, and the murders of our Ambassador Chris Stevens and his colleagues Sean Smith, Tyrone Woods, and Glen Doherty. Each man made the choice to go to a place few of us would ever choose to go in turbulent times from which most of us would flee. They had gone to represent our nation's best values and highest purpose. Chris Stevens, "our man in Benghazi," spoke five languages (three of northern African people) and was learning Farsi so he could serve our nation in Iran as he was most needed there. He knew who he was and served God and country with distinction.

Chris was beloved among the Libyan people and rightly so. He believed in them and identified with their deep yearning for freedom. He had gone to the Middle East as a young Peace Corps volunteer in 1991, teaching English in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco. It was there in the mountains of Morocco that he found his purpose for living as he served among Arab Muslims of North Africa. He had served as a diplomat in Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel before being dispatched to Libya by the Bush Administration as the first American to establish diplomatic relations with Moammar Quaddafi before his eventual fall from power. He was the only man who could speak with Quaddafi and the rebels. He was an usually gifted ambassador of Peace.

Two months before he died during an assault on 9/11 by an obscure brigade of Islamist fighters know as Ansar Al-Sharia, Stevens said to friends in an email that the US presence in Libya was thawing decades of hostility toward the west. "People smile more and much more open with foreigners. . . . Americans, French and British are enjoying unusual popularity."

This week's tragedy was even more so because "our man in Benghazi" knew who he was, why he was there, and who he was serving. He laid down his life for his friends – both Libyan and American; Christians and Muslims.

The same could be said for a young Nazarene in today's Gospel story from Mark. Climbing into the mountains north of the Galilean Sea with his disciples, Jesus of Nazareth comes to the mountain villages of Caesarea Philippi. Here along the Syrian border, in a place known for its pagan temples and known as the birthplace of the Greek god Pan, by a cave whose springs form the source of the Jordan River, Jesus engages his disciples in a conversation about who they believe they are, who they belong to and who they follow.

He begins by asking who do "people" say that "I am?" The answers fly back: "Some say John the Baptizer . . . others Elijah . . . others one of the prophets." Then he inquires, "Who do YOU say that I am?" In every classroom down through the ages there is one student whose hand is ready to shoot high in the air with an answer. That student among Jesus' disciples is Peter. Without hesitation, Peter responds, "You are God's Anointed One." In other words, Peter is saying, Jesus is the "messiah," the one for whom the Jewish faith has waited many years. He is the deliverer. He is the liberator. He is the healer. He is the teacher who will clear-up all that others have gotten wrong.

With these words, Jesus shushes Peter and tells Peter and the 11 other disciples to say nothing to anyone. **Really Jesus?** The 12 are aware of your divine and sacred nature, your special chosenness among God's chosen people and they not talk about it? Are you serious? Similar to last week, when after healing the man who was blind and deaf, Jesus told him not to proclaim this great good news (and he did), Jesus wants silence about this so others can figure it out for themselves. Why? Why can't Peter and others talk about special, how different, how unique their rabbi is? Simply this: Jesus is more interested in modeling messiah than proclaiming it. He is more interested in those around him figuring out how and why to follow him than following for all the wrong reasons.

There is a cost to being his disciple. Every person who follows Jesus will someday have to “take up his cross or her cross” to follow him. Those who follow Jesus will have to suffer. They will have to deny themselves to follow him. In time, they will have to die. Jesus is startlingly honest high in the mountains – away from the crowds who love his teachings and love his healings even more. He has not drawn men and women to him to provide an easy answer.

He knows who he is. He knows what his calling and his fate will be. This ambassador of peace knows that self-sacrifice, suffering and death come with the territory and the people he has been called to protect and defend. He seeks to awaken something within the souls of his followers, something like chivalry, something that calls them higher and higher and closer to God. He wants them to find out who they really are.

By discovering who Jesus is, each of us is given the chance to discover who we really are. The true way to self-fulfillment is the way of self-denial. It is the way of the cross. The apostle Paul knew this. In Galatians he wrote, “*I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.*” (Galatians 2:20). John Calvin addressed self-denial as the summary of the Christian Life. Calvin writes in the *Institutes*:

We are not our own; therefore neither our reason nor our will should predominate in our deliberations and actions.

We are not our own; therefore let us not propose it as our end, to seek what may be (easy) or expedient for us. . . .

We are not our own; therefore let us, as far as possible, forget ourselves and all things that are ours.

On the contrary, we are God’s; to God therefore, let us live and die.

We are God’s; therefore let God’s wisdom and will preside in all our actions.

We are God’s; toward God, therefore, as our only legitimate end, let every part of our lives be directed. (Institutes, III, 7).

In a prison cell just before his execution, pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, *“Who am I? They mock me these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.”* (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, chapter 6)

Most of us aren't called to Paul, Calvin or Bonhoeffer. We aren't called to be apostles, theologians or martyrs (or all three in Paul's case). We may not be called to giants of faith. But every day as I read the stories in the obituaries, every day in common conversations, every day in my experience of serving God, I see people answering the question, “Who am I?,” in relation to God. I see mothers and fathers caring for their children and giving themselves selflessly and lovingly in the dark of night when no one else is there. I see men and women dedicating themselves to a dying or suffering spouse or family member. I see youth and young adults with purpose who make a difference by serving God, caring for others and not merely serving their own ego-driven life.

I see people who take up their cross and follow Jesus. I see you when you do it, too. I really see you when you follow Jesus . . . I do.

Who am I? Who are you? Are you a faith-grower who seeks to follow Jesus or simply a church-goer who seeks to get by on an hour (or more) of worship each week?

This Nazarene carpenter gets to us. He calls to us. He beckons us to come follow him. Surrounded by the gods of our times, we might have a hard time seeing Jesus. In the onslaught of hatred and the acts of those who – in the name of God – kill and destroy life, we may have a hard time seeing the face of love and compassion. On days like this past Tuesday, the eleventh anniversary of 9/11, when supposed-Christians like Terry Jones (once again) spout-off hate for Mohammed, hate for Islam and hate for you and me as a result, and when hate-filled Islamic extremists respond by killing good men like Chris Stevens, Sean Smith, Tyrone Woods, and Chris Doherty, the cynic would say that it is better to give up on God and worship Pan and the pagan gods found in the ancient temples near the springs of Caesarea Philippi.

But, I believe that is the time to reflect more deeply upon our moments of life transformation and hope and rededicate ourselves to all that and more.

So the questions of Jesus remain with us 2,000 years later. “*Who do people say that I am?*” and “*Who do you say that I am?*” “**You are the Messiah!**” proclaimed Peter so long ago. We know Peter was right. We know this truth resides in the very essence of our souls. We need not hide from the truth of Peter’s answer. Rather, it is our task to answer these and other questions – “Who am I?” “Who will I become?” “Whom will I serve?” “How will I become a transformer in my world, in my times – in little ways and large ones?”

I encourage you to remember the places and times and people who have been transformers in your life. Connect with them. Reconnect with them. Discover them. As we belong to God and not to ourselves, we must find a way to daily pick up the crosses of our lives and follow Jesus. It is as simple and as difficult as that.

God needs ambassadors. God needs ambassadors of hope. So, be one. God needs ambassadors of love. So be one. God needs ambassadors of justice. So be one. Today, God needs peacemakers. Today, there is an opening for the post of ambassador. One of God’s beloved ones as laid down his life for his friends. So, be an ambassador of peace in the place where live, love and serve. Amen.

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