

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

18th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C

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Text: John 1:35-42

Title: “Who Are You? Know Your Name”

(Early service)

It was a few years ago, I think, when I wrote a newsletter article that cited evidence from the human genome project that when human DNA is analyzed down to its basic components that there is no evidence of race. That is there is no distinction between one human being and another.

Not long after that article, our own Larry Davis, who is a scientist who understands genetics better than most, certainly better than I do, informed me that the conclusion I shared was malarkey. It's not true, he told me. Why, then, are people paying to have their DNA analyzed in order to understand what their genetic origins are? On the National Geographic website you can pay for a test in order to learn about your genetic history. You can do the same thing through Ancestry.com. Pay for the test, give a saliva sample, send it in and the lab will give you a print out that will tell you what percentage of your DNA belongs to the African gene pool, if you have any African ancestors. Or maybe you are Chinese or French or Native American or one of the European countries, perhaps.

(Later service)

Several weeks ago I stumbled across an interesting program called The DNA Journey. The purpose of The DNA Journey campaign is to show that we, as people, have more things uniting us than dividing us. The DNA Journey is part of Momondo's overall vision of a more open and tolerant world. The way it worked was that 67 people were filmed talking about themselves and where they come from for 10 minutes each. After this, they were asked to take a saliva DNA test. Participants came from all walks of life and all kinds of occupations. Examples of the participants' occupations are: secretary, dog trainer, actor, account manager and model. Let's take a look...

(Show video clip)

One person later said of this experience:

‘It was a profoundly emotional experience, and made me question who I am and who I thought I was. My family and friends were inspired by my journey, and loved the idea behind the campaign! Many of them are now desperate to undergo their own tests to discover their origins.’

(Read more at <http://www.momondo.com/inspiration/momondo-the-dna-journey-how-it-was-made/#2cBMoz5OhUVbysok.99>)

It may be one of the ways many people are trying to answer the question, Who are you? Not what do you do, but who are you as a person? What makes you who you are?

In the scriptures, the question of “who are you” often starts with a name. Years ago I was teaching a class on “The Gospel According to John”. I asked the group to read chapter 1 and list the names or titles used to describe Jesus. Just the first chapter. This is what they came up with:

1. Word
2. Light
3. Jesus Christ
4. Lamb of God
5. A man who ranks ahead of John
6. Son of God
7. Rabbi
8. Teacher
9. Messiah
10. Anointed
11. Him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote.
12. Son of Joseph from Nazareth
13. King of Israel
14. Son of Man

Fourteen titles or different descriptions of Jesus in that one chapter alone. Why all these different descriptors for Jesus? We won't go through each one and talk about ways in which they describe him, but let's look at several:

Why the Word? Because who Jesus is reflects God speaking into the world. His life and service in the world is God vocalizing who God is. “The Word was with God. The Word was God.”

Why the light? Because unless you want to go to sleep, light is a good thing. We need light in order to see anything. In a dark room or on a dark street, light is a welcome addition. It empowers us to see. But light also has the effect of driving out darkness. If you want to keep thieves away you light up your yard because darkness can serve as a veil where harmful things can happen. When people think others can't see what they're doing, sometimes they do the wrong thing. Jesus as the light has come to give sight. Jesus as the light empowers us to see who God is. Jesus as the light also serves to illuminate the darkness in life that is not of God.

Why Lamb of God? Because the practice of his Jewish faith was to offer animal sacrifices as an expression of gratitude to God for all God has provided. It was also a practice that expressed a desire to be forgiven of sin. AND more, it was a reminder of Passover. The story of Passover goes back to the experience of the Hebrew people when they were slaves in Egypt. God sent Moses to free them. Most of you probably know the story of Moses and his showdown with the Pharaoh of Egypt. The plagues. The pharaoh's stubborn refusal to let the Hebrew people go free until the last plague: the death of all the firstborn in Egypt. IN order to avoid losing their own firstborn, the Hebrew people were instructed to “...take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household. ⁴ If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbor in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. ⁵ Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶ You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight. ⁷ They shall take some of the blood and put

it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it. ⁸ They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.”

The Passover lamb therefore was the unblemished animal—the best of the best-- whose blood saved the lives of the Hebrew people and led them to freedom. So why use this name for Jesus as John the Baptist does in the Gospel of John? Because Jesus offered himself as a gift in a similar way: to save those whom he loves by revealing what God is willing to do —die on a cross—in order to reveal the power of God’s love. As John’s Gospel later proclaims:

16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

17 “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (John 3:16-17).

Unlike the Passover lamb that did not have a choice, Jesus as the Lamb of God willingly sacrificed that we may witness what God looks like, how God acts, the depth of God’s love for human beings like us.

Why Son of God/Son of Man? How often have you looked at a person and knowing that person’s parents have said: “Oh, you look like your mother” or “Oh I can see your father in you”? When people looked at Jesus, they saw God. He was a unique person who revealed the presence and power of God in ways they could only describe as God-like. And so John the Baptist tells his own disciples: “I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.”

Yet, Jesus is also a human being, like us. He walks, talks, eats and sleeps. He gets tired. He tells humorous stories. He hurts. He cries. Just like us. And so he describes himself to a skeptical Nathanael in the first chapter of John: “you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.”

Because he is a human being who needs the attention of God, a special human being yes, but still a human being.

If someone asked of Jesus “who are you”? There are a lot of titles, a lot of descriptions that fit who he is, many of which aren’t included in John’s first chapter. All of those titles, however, are positive. All of them, I think and believe, point to God as the giver of life and love. All of them reveal Jesus as One who seeks to bring Good News which is what the word Gospel means: Good News! Jesus is the bringer and revealer of God’s Good News! That’s who Jesus is.

So who are you? If others were to look at you and your life in the way in which they looked at Jesus and his life, what words would be used to describe you in the first chapter of your life? We aren’t talking here about DNA results that might describe your genetic background, but rather who are you as a person?

As I thought about this “who are you” question, Psalm 139 came to mind. It is one of my all-time favorite psalms. We heard it in the dramatic reading just a bit ago:

¹ O LORD, you have searched me and known me.

² You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from far away.

³ You search out my path and my lying down,

and are acquainted with all my ways.

⁴ Even before a word is on my tongue,
O LORD, you know it completely.

...

⁶ Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷ Where can I go from your spirit?
Or where can I flee from your presence?

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹ If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰ even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹⁴ I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.

Who are you, child of God? How does God see you, the One who searches you and knows you, the One from whom we cannot escape? What words, titles, descriptions would be written? Kind? Loving? Generous? Humble? Peacemaker? Wise? Funny? Dad? Mom?

A few years ago at our annual conference, Rev. Jorge Acevedo was the guest teacher. Jorge is the lead pastor of a UM church in southwest Florida that grew from 400 members to over 2,600 during his time there. He is a genuine person who confessed his own weakness in the face of addiction as he taught us. He said when he went to serve in the place he is currently serving he walked down the aisle in the empty sanctuary and touching each pew, he prayed, "God send us the people no one else wants. Send us the people no one else wants." To tell you the truth I'm not sure why that came to mind as I thought about this question "who are you", thought about Jesus as the bringer of God's Good News, thought about Psalm 139 reminding us that we cannot escape the Spirit of God. Maybe it has to do with the psalmist's observation that we are all "...fearfully and wonderfully made." You are "fearfully and wonderfully made." You don't need a DNA test to tell you that.

We are all fearfully and wonderfully made. Our worship team would like to invite you to express this belief by asking you to come forward and place your thumb on an inkpad and make your thumbprint on the posters in the front of the sanctuary. There are also some cleansing wipes for you to take to clean off the ink, but we invite you to come as we sing and offer God the symbol of your uniqueness as a child of God. You might also consider it as a way to express gratitude to God for the One who has come, is coming and will always come as the bringer of God's good news. And as the thumbprints continue to add up, consider that there are some who are not here, maybe some that nobody else wants, who are also unique as children of God. Pray for them. Make yourselves open to them. Invite them. Be a witness for them so that maybe one day they will experience through you, your actions, your voice, the Good News

of God for them that they, too, are “fearfully and wonderfully made”, whoever they are.

