

Who am I?

That is the question a person asks at least once in one's life. Even Jesus was interested in that question, and asked his disciples:

And they told him, "John the Baptist; and others say, Eli'jah; and others one of the prophets (Mk. 8:28)."

But that is what others said. Jesus wanted to hear directly from his own disciples:

"But who do you say that I am?" ...Peter answered him, "You are the Christ (Mk. 8:29)."

Apparently, the rest of the disciples had no idea who Jesus was. We can give them some slack, for they did not know him for many years, but were recruited by Jesus not long ago.

**W**hen Jesus visited his hometown at the beginning of his ministry, he was genuinely surprised, because the townspeople did not receive him. Then the writer Mark stitches to this story another one in which

Jesus sent the disciples on mission. Jesus sounds almost ruthless, when he told his disciples what they should do to those who did not welcome them:

If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."

Such an attitude stands out above the compassion and warmth Jesus exhibited to the sick and the poor. Wouldn't you say that it is an oddball aspect of Jesus' personality?

What we can gather from this is: even Jesus did not take rejection well. It is not so much surprising to us, once we understand that this advice to the disciples to "shake off the dust of their feet" comes from the one who had been personally acquainted with the pain of rejection.

**A**t this point of his ministry, Jesus had a certain idea of self-identity. We know what it was, because he said it:

6:4 Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."

Obviously, Jesus viewed himself as a prophet at that time. Who did the townspeople think he was at that time? Let us revisit the reaction of the townspeople to Jesus' teaching at the synagogue, where they saw him grow up:

<sup>2</sup> And on the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue; and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands! <sup>3</sup> Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

At one moment, they were astounded by Jesus' teaching. Then the next, they took offense at him. Why would they? Wouldn't we feel proud of one of our own, say, Lane or Misa, who returned to the home church, all

grown up and successful, willing to share their insights and wisdom many years from now?

**T**he instant review of Jesus' teaching by townspeople speaks volumes on why the villagers took offense at Jesus:

"Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?"

The townspeople called Jesus, the son of Mary. Instead of being the son of Joseph, Jesus was known as the son of Mary. The townspeople never accepted Jesus as the legitimate son of Joseph. Then who was Jesus to the townspeople?

**I**f we recall how Matthew begins his Gospel, it was the genealogy according to the male line of succession:

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. <sup>2</sup> Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers...

And we do note that the genealogical language is "the father of this... and the father of that..." To the eyes of the townspeople, Joseph was not father of Jesus. Even Matthew confirms that Jesus was not Joseph's child:

<sup>16</sup> and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ.

Those of us who follow the birth narrative through the eyes of faith believe that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. To the eyes of those who have faith, Jesus was the child of God the Father. But that is not what the townspeople saw. To the secular eyes, Jesus was simply a bastard child who had no father, Mary was not a virgin, and God was, good heavens, not Jesus' Father.

**T**he son of Mary—this phrase allows us to peek into the childhood and the formative years of Jesus in his hometown. From the villagers' perspective, Jesus was way out of his league.

The carpenter had the temerity to come to the synagogue and sit down to teach them, as if he were a rabbi. Who does he think he is? Which rabbinical school did this carpenter attend? Their contempt of him since the childhood still carried after all these years. Apparently, they wanted Jesus to stay put where they put him.

It is reasonable to conclude that the oddball aspect of Jesus' personality that popped up when he sent his disciples on mission, that I pointed out earlier, may be explained by the way he was treated in his home town as he grew up there, and by the way the townspeople received him when he returned as a mature man.

**T**his incident at the synagogue in his hometown took place in the early part of Jesus' ministry. It appears that his recollection of the childhood and formative years was still raw. We are looking at the *human* side of Jesus that bears all the scars he had received while growing up in

his home town. The townspeople's unrelenting rejection reminded him of the old wounds. We are looking at Jesus allowing his personal emotion color the future rejection that his disciples would undoubtedly suffer, when he sent out his disciples on mission. The following saying of Jesus is a far cry from it, however:

<sup>27</sup> "But I say to you that hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. <sup>29</sup> To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from him who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt (Lk. 6).

We are now seeing Jesus the human being maturing in his spirit and emotions, transcending his grief and pain, as he gained experience and inspiration in his ministry of the Kingdom of God.

What hurts the human psyche the most is marginalization of the identity of a person. There is an old saying in Korea, "Even a worm squirms, if stepped on." It

is a very *human* response to react against the force that hurts. It is an act of preserving one's own self-worth. There are only two things that make one deserve such marginalization: one's own character and action. That is called justice. Today, however, there are many instances of such injustice of marginalizing, or degrading a person's worth, and the person's identity, apart from one's character or action.

Our congregation has spoken out many years ago against any attempt to marginalize any one of the different sexual orientation with which they are born. Our military is still willing to marginalize its members for their sexual orientation. Once you come out of the closet, suddenly you are deemed unworthy to serve your country or defend the freedom; your past military achievements mean absolutely nothing.

There are some who are still marginalized today for the skin color and the gender with which they were born, especially in

compensation and promotion. Some are demeaned, because they are poor, homeless, or uneducated. Some are disrespected because of their age. Some are persecuted for being born in their religious heritage and cultural custom.

All these things and more dishonor a person's identity and degrade the person's worth. Jesus had endured it throughout his formative years, and it took some time in his mature years to overcome the oppressive wounds. And that is probably why Jesus was sensitive to the plight of the poor and the sick, of the widows and orphans, who were marginalized by his society. He did not forget "one of the least of these." He himself was well acquainted with grief and pain. Jesus stood with those who were marginalized and rejected.

**I** have indicated a couple weeks ago that his adoptive father, Joseph, contributed to the healthy formation of Jesus' person and psyche, by being there to provide a stable and loving home.

Joseph's presence in Jesus' childhood was critical to the sound formation of the "fatherless" kid, especially in that ancient context of the society which did not view tolerantly any birth outside the wedlock.

For most people, such treatment of a fatherless child may be the source of entertainment or the superior sense, or their way of pronouncing the distinction of the "proper" way a "family" should be made. For some reason, this atmosphere of the hometown affected the way God operated through Jesus in his final visitation to his hometown:

6:5 And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. 6:6 And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching.

Jesus could not do many deeds of power in his hometown. Matthew attributes it to "unbelief (Greek: *apistia*)," or "unfaith." Translating *apistia* as "lack of faith" is insufficient, for in

“unfaith” there is the component of *the active will not to believe*. If the word, faith, is an action word, so is the word, unfaith.

**T**he human spirit that marginalizes another person interferes with the Spirit of God. It hinders the operation of the Holy Spirit in our lives. When we declare that a person is not so much worthy for being born who he or she is, we deny that a certain person, or a group of persons, is created in the image of God. When our spirits marginalize others for being whom God created, the Holy Spirit cannot do the deeds of power on our behalf. Unfaith *actively and willfully* interferes with the power of the Holy Spirit.

When we marginalize other human beings—your wife, your child, your colleague, your underling, a stranger, the poor, the sick, or the powerless, that is, “one of the least of these”—for being who they are, we set ourselves apart from the grace of God who created us human

beings in God’s image, and we call them not good enough.

When we marginalize a person, we actively deny the image of God in that person, and we willfully deny that what God created was good at all. That act of denial is the active and willful part of unfaith, *apistia*. When we marginalize other human beings, we willfully and actively diminish the fullness of God’s goodness.

**C**onversely, when we do recognize the gifts and graces of others, appreciate their contributions and creativity, and encourage and provide them with the opportunities so that they might grow and flourish, the Holy Spirit flows into our lives like a powerful river. We will witness the deed of power in our own very lives.

May the Holy Spirit flow into your lives, as you freshly discover gifts and graces in one another, and give glory to God for the fullness of God’s Creation.