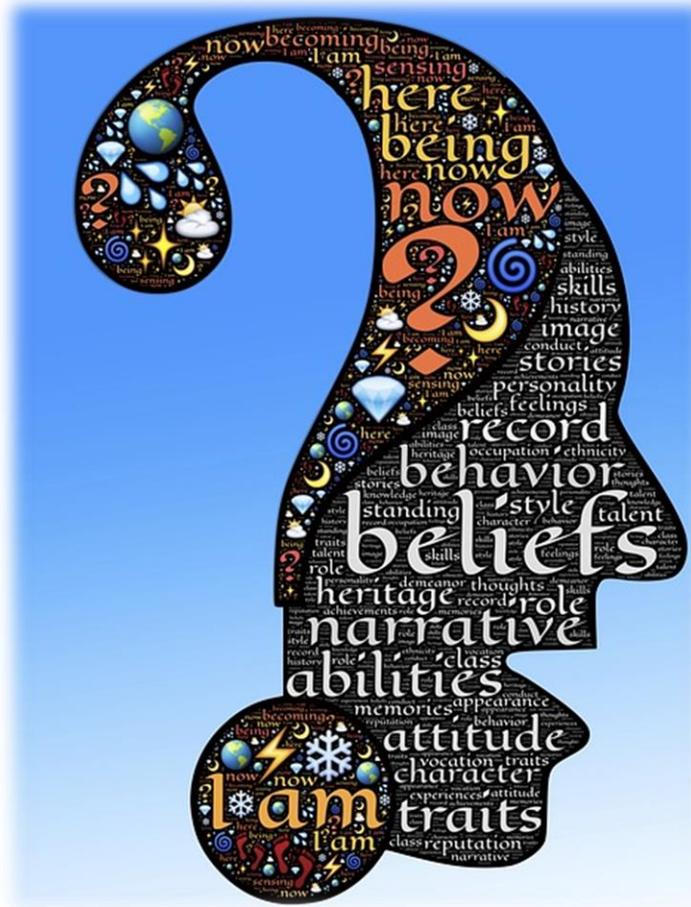


WHO? WHO? WHO?



EXODUS 1:8-2:10
PSALM 124
ROMANS 12:1-8
MATTHEW 16:13-20

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time
Proper 17, Year A
September 3, 2017

Who? Who? Who?

(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)

“The big brother of the Fox sitcom star, Mindy Kaling, reveals that he got into medical school by pretending to be African-American.” You may know of Mindy’s work on the sitcom “The Office” and her present starring role in “The Mindy Project,” now going on its sixth season. In a successful effort to beat quotas established by affirmative action initiatives, Vijay Chokal-Ingam stirred up quite a bit of “controversy” when he revealed that he pretended to be black to get into medical school. He interviewed at prestigious schools like Harvard and Columbia, “and found himself on the wait lists at the University of Pennsylvania, Washington University and Mt. Sinai—despite his relatively mediocre 3.1 GPA and his family’s considerable wealth.” He settled on the St. Louis University Medical School, dropping out of the program after his second year. Years later he says on his blog, “I got into medical school because I said I was black . . . the funny thing is, I’m not. My plan actually worked. Lucky for you, I never became a doctor.” And to that, we can all say a hearty “Amen” and “Thank God for small favors!” Part of the method of the madness of Chokal-Ingam’s charade was an ingenious trick. He simply trimmed what he called his heavy Indian eyebrows and shaved his head, hiding his strait locks. Chokal-Ingam and his famous actress sister are now having a spat because of his actions, her fear being

that he “. . . will bring shame on the family” See: <http://nypost.com/2015/04/05/mindy-kalings-brother-pretended-to-be-black-to-get-into-medical-school>; <http://nypost.com/2015/04/12/mindy-kalings-brother-explains-why-he-faked-being-black-for-med-school>).

I wonder if it was a similar to that back in the day with the great liberator Moses. You remember his story I am sure. Most of us as children heard his story at bedtime because it is one of the more endearing and immensely popular Bible stories. Hidden in the bulrushes by his mother to protect him from becoming another victim at the hands of a very paranoid Pharaoh hell-bent on wiping out all the male babies produced by the Hebrew slaves, Moses is saved from certain slaughter. He is miraculously discovered by the Pharaoh's daughter, preserved according to the legend, destined for greatness. Subsequently, he is brought into the royal family, the palatial confines of the Pharaoh himself, adopted into the extravagant lifestyles of the Egyptian aristocracy, living among the most rich and famous, an outsider instantaneously transformed into an insider of the highest regard with all the clout that goes with being a part of Pharaoh's household. A silver spoon thrust in his mouth, Moses becomes an instant trust baby, winning the most unlikely of lotteries in every way imaginable, especially for someone of his stock, from his tribe and clan.

Imagine what it would have been like to grow up knowing that you were of Hebrew descent, intended to live a subservient life, but instead fully aware that you were living life in the lap of luxury, treated as if you were kin of the Pharaoh, living “high on the hog” as we say, as if you were flesh and blood offspring, a real, bonafide son of Pharaoh. Imagine the psychological torture if you were someone who possessed even an ounce of self-awareness, of propriety and compassion, predisposed to even the slightest modicum of empathy as a sympathetic observer. Imagine the guilt of knowing that by all rights you should have never survived infancy, but should have been slaughtered right along with other Hebrew male babies, perhaps even other relatives, cousins, and such. Moses would have surely been a psychotherapists’ dream. Imagine how conflicted, how tormented, and tortured was his very compromised soul. Moses, the Bible says that God saved you to become a great liberator, but in some ways, you know that you were just plain lucky. Imagine the agony of standing on the great porticos of Pharaoh’s house and looking out on the great city, watching your fellow Hebrews toil in the hot sun as it beat down on their indentured backs, knowing that for all intents and purposes you could be, should be right there with them. What a sobering moment! How did you manage to keep up this charade well into adulthood? It is amazing that it took you as long as it did to finally snap and go postal. But, your conscience would not allow you to block out what you knew to be true, your real heritage

of tribe and clan, benignly turning a deaf ear, ignoring the misery that your people were enduring to make your life a proverbial bowl of cherries. Moses, you had it all! You were living large, living the dream. But, you were not at peace! And, so you snapped!

Perhaps what is most surprising about Moses' deep-seated dilemmas is that it took him as long as it did before he reacted with violence, all those years of restlessness, an internal conflict boiling over in one sudden, murderous display, an egregious act of the highest, uh lowest order that no one in the upper echelon of authority could overlook or dismiss. No person of integrity of being could hold all that inside one's person for a prolonged period of time. Eventually and inevitably something was bound to give, and with Moses it happened when he witnessed firsthand, up close and personal the merciless abuse inflicted on one of his kin. Yes, Moses snapped, totally losing it as we are wont to say, and the rest as they say, whoever they is, is history. It was a Paul Harvey moment, now allowing for "the rest of the story" and it is a story we all know quite well. Thank you, Cecil B. DeMille! (Ya'll got that! You are listening! I like that!)

Ever since my arrival as Senior Minister here a little more than three and a half years ago—time sure flies when you are having fun—one of the planks I have incessantly discussed in multiple forums is the importance,

the value of discovering and clarifying identity, of branding in a way that boldly declares who and what we are about as the people of God gathered in this place as beloved faith community. Every organization or institution has an ethos, a defining principle that is the paradigm from which everything flows, in our case our message, the mission and ministry that galvanizes us as a corporate body. It is bedrock, foundational for the health of any systemic entity, any institution whatsoever. There was a day when this church thrived with what we now call a community church model, the only show in town. People from all walks of denominational life streamed into this sanctuary, creating a beautiful melting pot on steroids, or was that melting pot “of” steroids! Today, the community church model still flourishes in certain contexts, but in some ways, it has been hijacked and held hostage, defining a much narrower market niche, usually describing churches that are inter or nondenominational in substance, characterized by evangelical, conservative, and sometimes even charismatic tendencies. While that is an oversimplification as well as a generalization, these premises tend to hold true. And, for the most part that explains the vortex into which this congregation was pulled. The system in this ecclesial setting worked beautifully until it did not! In the “modern” period, the time of this church’s heyday, critical theological questions for the most part were either ignored or suppressed, and the narrative from most steeples was rooted in traditional assumptions about the Bible and the Christian faith. Most folks just assumed that everybody held the same ecclesiology and theology because they had chosen to be

here, the church accidentally, if not strangely, practicing a version of “Don’t ask; don’t tell! Let’s be honest, the days of Ozzie and Harriet and Leave It to Beaver, and even as late as The Brady Bunch were simpler times. Shockingly to all of us, Florence Henderson is dead! That should tell us a lot! As long as individuals politely choose to be ignorant, uninformed of their neighbors’ beliefs and thoughts, all is well. But, woe be it when honest debate and dialogue, sincere and serious conversation seasoned with divergent opinions, authentic, genuine diversity, becomes the order of the day. Many systems cannot manage or maintain that level of systemic insult, that kind of openness, churches perhaps even more pronounced in that regard. That was then; this is now! Welcome to the world of postmodernity!

Moses struggled mightily coming to grips with his true identity, his authentic self. My guess is that long before he murdered one who was once his own, a citizen of his adopted people, he knew full well he did not belong, had no business in Pharaoh’s court and that he could not stay there any longer, living not in the Nile, but in denial! Sorry about that one! Had to get it in there! Moses could no longer live a lie! Once he murdered this sudden adversary, blowing his career and his cover forever, Moses was forced to go about the hard therapeutic work of intentional introspection, the difficult task of learning how to live as a commoner, far removed from Pharaoh’s gilded bells and whistles. Moses set about the task of finding himself,

now that he was an out of the closet Hebrew. And once you are out, you are always out, out for good! The story of Moses is not only the story of liberation from bondage by an indentured people, but is the story of Moses' personal journey of self-discovery and coming to terms with his family of origin. Until Moses reached a place of contentment about his authentic self, never could or would he be able to fulfill what was now clearly his life's mission, leading a rebellion against the people who once fed and clothed him with all the finery, all the opulent trappings of wealth and power and prestige, all necessary ingredients for a temptingly shallow life, a most hollow existence. For many of us on life's journey it may well take most, if not all a lifetime, to discover who we are and our ultimate purpose. It is no small thing and rarely, if ever, an easy process, a short journey. And, it is always about the journey and never the final destination!

Part of what I find most interesting in Moses' journey toward self-discovery is his accompanying revelation about the God that the Hebrews could only vaguely describe as they recalled the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Today's Witness from the Hebrew scriptures in Exodus describes a defining moment in time in which Moses, still on his path as a seeker, encounters the burning bush, the blazing bush as it is boldly described, a bush that burns, yet is not consumed, as Moses is faced with a whole host of life-altering

decisions. Evidently, Moses had come upon a Tamarisk bush, a shrub that grows in this part of the world. It has sacks on its limbs, each vial containing a small amount of oil. When they burst from the hot, midday heat, they combust, but in their rapid fire the branches are not damaged. Back in the day, this could have and probably would have been interpreted as a theophany, an appearance of God. And, truly it was! It is here where Moses' mind is piqued about what he must do regarding his people, his accountability and responsibility to his family of origin. And, he knows full well that because of his former insider status, that he is privy, specially equipped, knowing all the secrets, the inner workings, and the weaknesses of those who were now his adversaries. As with any human being assigned with a major task, feeling the weight of such responsibility, Moses is filled with doubt and overwhelmed with a sense of insignificance and inadequacy. "Who am I" Moses surely wondered as he considered the prospect of taking on Pharaoh and his legions, Ramses a powerful presence who would not give up his free labor easily. Ah, if only Moses could have grasped in that crucible moment that he was a child of God, created in the divine image, he would have known that he had everything that he needed, he would have had the conviction that he was well endowed, fully equipped, being everything he needed to be to get the job done. Reverse Moses' identity question, "Who am I," and in this same text we discover the identity of God, the great "I am who I am", that despite this name is still a God heavily

wrapped in mystery and wonder, awe-inspiring existential transcendence, a God always beyond our knowing, our grasp, always beyond our limited comprehension. God is suddenly, surprisingly revealed as YAHWEH, a name so holy that it is never uttered by a faithful Jew, a name that is impossible to define, far beyond all definition, “I am being who I am being” about as close as any of us will ever get in translation. I am reminded of the Paraclete in the Christian scriptures, a term describing the holy and still speaking Spirit of God. It too has no real defining language or definition, and folks, that is exactly as it should be! Sidebar: I would be remiss in any sermon exegeting this text if I did not remind the listener that the term “Jehovah,” which is commonly used in our vernacular thanks to King James, was at one time a made-up word. As I mentioned, the sacred name of God is never uttered by a faithful Jew, orthodox or otherwise. The letters of the Hebrew language are entirely consonants, with vowels being created by symbols called vowel points, each one placed appropriately by the corresponding letter to make specific sounds. At the advent of the King James Bible, which was translated from the Latin Vulgate and not from the original languages of Hebrew and Greek, some brilliant mind took the vowel points to the general term for God, Adonai, and recalibrated and retrofitted them onto the consonants for YAHWEH since the vowel points were never attached to the sacred name for fear that lazy reader might forget and utter them. You combine YAHWEH and ADONAI and you create a new, made up on the spot word, you coin a term,

JEHOVAH, a made-up name that we have sung and taught and preached for centuries—no offense to our Jehovah’s Witness brothers and sisters out there. I must confess, however, I love sharing that little tidbit with them when they come knocking on my door, disturbing my peace. But, I digress; I often do!

Empowered by the evolving, emerging identity of this God, a divine presence that was rapidly being adopted as his own, as if not bolstered by his own emerging, evolving identity hewn out of his intensive searching as a true seeker, Moses is now ready, now poised for the adventure of a lifetime, steeled to make his mark in history by leading and liberating his people, a people who had to learn to trust this once presumed outsider, by leading them out of slavery and into the risky business that comes with freedom and fresh air as they journey through an unknown wilderness, exiled for a generation, always leaning into the hope of a land of promise somewhere out there on the horizon. What an adventure! Despite the longest odds, full of great difficulties, their flaws and failures as a fragile people often getting the best of them, they would eventually, perhaps inevitably, succeed and would enter a new land complete with a new way of life. In the process, they learned much about themselves, individually and communally, both through the purifying, sanitizing lens of history recorded in perpetuity in holy writ for all generations, as well as through their real-time

experiences, believing the hand of God directly upon them, the Spirit of God overshadowing them. And, of course, they learned much more about this God who was transparently in a transcendent moment revealed to Moses, once upon a time known only as the mysterious God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob their ancestors.

Years ago, some new church members encouraged me to experience an educational program that had profoundly impacted their lives and their relationships. They even paid the tuition for the weekend. It is called the Landmark Forum and it is still going strong today. It emerged out of the old EST gatherings that originated in San Francisco I believe in the 70s. It is a long-regimented weekend in which you literally turn mind, body, and soul over to the leadership. I agreed to do the Forum to show solidarity with these profoundly enthusiastic church members as their pastor. I could tell you stories from the weekend that would both amuse and even horrify you, but I survived the ordeal and am a card carrying graduate of Landmark! To boil it all down with what is in all honesty and huge oversimplification, a significant aspect of the gathering is designed to help individuals, especially those who struggle with personality issues, particularly those of self-confidence, find themselves, to discover their unique identity and the way that they interact or engage other human beings. One of the points they stress is that as we interact with people, that most of them are running rackets, i.e. telling personal stories formed out of their individual mythology, amounting to nothing more than a false

narrative used to cover inconsistencies and/or inadequacies informing and challenging their personhood. Part of the instruction was designed to help people become whole, which usually meant being “complete” as they called it, with specific life events, particularly those that would be considered significant, even life altering or changing. Recognizing a little OCD tendency in my own behavior, in the way that I go about doing things all compartmentalized in order, I confess I appreciated that concept immensely. As I participated, and I confess I found myself being more of an observer, being the intellectually, curious thinker that I am about everything, it appeared to me that the sessions were a cross between a football pep rally and a non-religious revival meeting. In every way but spiritual, it looked like and functioned like many of the emotional revivalist events I attended in my conservative, evangelical settings as a Southern Baptist back in the day. The climax of the weekend occurred at the Saturday night show, which included everyone being strongly encouraged, emphasis on strongly, to put our heads on our desks and weep and wail like there was no tomorrow. To say the least, the sound was deafening and disturbing. I am a rather good actor and so I faked the whole thing! I did not have the need to display such guttural reactions. My take away from the entire weekend is the reason I am telling this story, that perhaps the biggest challenge most human beings face is in coming to grips with identity issues, of self-discovery, and awareness, and of finding oneself against the myriad expressions of our humanity that constantly bombard us, confronting us at every level in every way. It is

even more pronounced for the younger generation as they navigate the vast nuance of social media. I will say that the experience was positive and profound, and that I learned much about human nature over the course of that weekend, lessons that have significantly, perhaps ironically, formed my career in pastoral ministry. The overriding question asked of the participants during the Forum, a poignant question inquired of everyone present over and over and over again, in terms of any life scenario that the group was sharing—and everyone had to share—any circumstance or situation in which one had found themselves, particularly of an uncomfortable nature, is, “Who am I being!” Who was I being in a significant, perhaps a most profound moment? Who should I have been to affect my needs, to having them met, to be complete or made whole? Perhaps identity is the one place where the secular and the religious intersect, are inseparably hardwired, inextricably linked, where they really do converge as one major concern of all of us human creatures!

Today’s sermon is “Who? Who? Who?”—yes, we are in “Who Ville” this morning—a title designed to indicate three of the most important questions confronting us as people and as people of faith. Who is God? Who am I? Who are we? All those questions have their focus in discovering and claiming identity. Rarely are they compartmentalized, but are usually all wrapped messily in one package together, inextricably hardwired to the point that for the most part they are inseparable, indistinguishable. Most times it is

impossible to identify individual strands. In everything we do as individuals and as a congregation, both equally important, those questions are never, or should never be far from our radar. One of our primary purposes here is to encourage, enable, and even empower our individual and collective understanding of who we are, who we are being. For in the answer to those “Who?” questions we hopefully find many of the answers we seek, peace for our lives and our souls, purpose for our beloved faith community as a locally gathered church, as we lean into the great mysteries of this thing called faith, hoping and praying that we will, at the minimum, at least once in our lifetime, experience the awe-inspiring presence of a God of great mystery and wonder, a God of transcendence that perhaps on occasion comes into the world in recognizable forms, even like bushes that burn but are not consumed. Part of the work we do together as the SouthShore United Church of Christ is the corporate work of developing and honing our identity, discovering who we believe we are and desire ourselves to be. That is the reason why, at least on occasion, we gather outside of worship for holy conversations, to consider, even wrestle with every aspect of our corporate, our congregational life together, our collective being. In matters like changing our church’s name and the name of our social hall, reaffirming our denominational affiliation, considering becoming formally Open and Affirming, and engaging our mission and visioning initiative, and proudly putting it all in writing for all

the world to see. All are sacred processes! Intentionality is the watchword by which we do all that we do in covenant relationship. Every church worth its salt engages these kinds of issues and processes, never shying away from the challenges that come with open and honest dialogue and debate, willing to risk appropriate conflict in reaching consensus and resolution. It is what we do! It worked back in the day for Moses and the once called Hebrews, soon to be called Israelites. With God’s help and our faith and trust in God and with one another, it will work here too, for it is tried and true and reflects the best of our collective humanity. As Jesus will say to us next week, “Where two or three,” or more are gathered . . .

In the name of the One who creates, redeems, sustains, and knows who we are even when we do not. Amen and amen.

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