

Who Am I? (How to Spell Joy)

Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

August 21, 2011

Rick Warren wrote the popular books, *The Purpose Driven Life* and *The Purpose Driven Church*. Warren's Saddleback Church in southern California is one of those legendary megachurches with weekly worship attendance in the thousands and a budget in the millions of dollars. Three years ago Warren was on the cover of *Time* magazine and he hosted a two-hour televised forum with presidential candidates McCain and Obama. One of the two hours treated the relationship between faith and politics. I thought it was a highlight of that 2008 campaign season. Pastor Warren's purpose driven books begin with the simple but important idea that "It's not about you."

Warren argues in *Purpose Driven Life* that biblical faith points us away from ourselves and our self-interest to God who has a purpose for each and every one of us. He says that his book differs from other self help books in that the key to finding purpose in our lives is not up to us. The answer to the meaning of life is not hidden inside of us. There is no technique or exercise to unlock the mystery and let the real you rise to the surface. It is not about you, Warren says. It's about God. The purpose driven life is found in our relationship to God, the God who has created us in the divine image to be in relationship with our creator and with our neighbor.

Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I headed? Why is there air? Why is the sky blue? How many stars are there out there in the night sky? Life is full of big questions like these. Sometimes, as we grow older, our questions become smaller and more self-centered: How much money do I need to buy a house, educate my children, run a business, take a vacation, retire? Will I have enough energy to get me through the day? Why can't I eat what I want? When will we get to the point of this sermon?

This time of year we begin to think about school. Students are going back to classes and beginning to pore over those syllabi and figure out how to organize and manage and get the work done within the coming weeks of the semester. I admit to liking school, and I miss it now that I am not being a student or a teacher in the classroom. One does not go through twenty-four years of elementary, middle, high, undergraduate and graduate programs if one does not enjoy the educational process: study, reading, discussion, research, writing. At the beginning a semester, you get that new book, and you open it up to the table of contents and the questions pour out: "What is this book about?" "What will be the main concerns of this book?" "What is the point of view or approach of the author?" And so on. It is all so fresh, new, stimulating, exciting. One of the things about academic life that thrills me is the grace that comes with each new course or term. You get to start fresh, with a blank slate. It is a new beginning. The dawn of a new day. New pencils, crisp and clean notebooks of paper, a jar of that white paste some of us tried to eat when we were young. You have a new opportunity to satisfy yourself and make a mark with your teacher and peers, learning new things and growing with the experience. Intellectual curiosity prompts more and deeper questions.

But, as you attend classes and crack those new books, you find the questions of others start to compete with and even overtake your own questions. Your questions change as the questions to you from your reading and listening and discussion begin to re-shape your perceptions, your base of knowledge, and your developing point of view. "How is my life going to be different after reading this book or taking this course?" "What do I know now that I didn't know before?" "How will I revise my perspective, given this new knowledge?" "Where will this adventure in learning take me?" "Where am I headed?" "Who am I?"

Most of us come to church for answers rather than questions. That's fine. Nothing wrong with the quest for answers. But of course the answers we seek and get have a lot to do with the questions we ask. Some look to the Bible as a book of answers. The Gideons place Bibles in motel bedside tables because they know that lonely people

far away from home are looking for comfort and answers. Nothing wrong with that. But I think our tradition in this church sees our faith and its source book in terms of their questions to us rather than their answers for us. Jesus asked a lot of questions. Some were rhetorical. "Are grapes gathered from thorns? Are figs gathered from thistles?" (Matthew 7:16) Jesus' rhetorical questions had obvious answers. Should a parent give a stone to the child asking for bread, or a snake to the child looking for a fish? (Matthew 7:10) Should you bind a strong man before trying to rob him? Does it make sense to light a lamp and then hide it under a bucket? Well, no.

The wisdom tradition of the Old Testament is good at questions. The book of Ecclesiastes is full of toppers. What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which we toil under the sun? Jesus follows that vein of wisdom when he asks, "What does it profit a person to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?" (Matthew 16:26)

When I was younger, I imagined that as I went through the school of life, I would have more answers than questions, but in fact the opposite has happened. Old questions go unanswered and new questions keep popping up. I am less sure about the answers I have been given. Thirty years ago I was more likely to be certain and adamant about answers I dished out from the pulpit. With youth comes exuberance, high energy and confidence that isn't always well founded. With age comes a narrowing of interest, a flagging of energy and even some crankiness and cynicism. The answer to the question, "What constitutes a purpose driven life" is different coming from a thirty year old and a sixty year old. My own answers are far more tentative and nuanced today than when the twenty-something revolutionary burst from seminary in the 1970s with his Afro, bell bottoms and call to arms manifestos.

The best teachers are not the ones who give out the best answers. The best teachers are the ones who stimulate the best questions and send fellow traveler learners well equipped along a path of lifelong discovery. The most important learning is that which opens the valve for ongoing questions in an intellectual curiosity that is never satisfied. There is nothing more deadly than the bigot whose mind is made up and who does not care about or respect the views of others. I am

not always impressed when someone tells me they read the Bible through from Genesis to Revelation every year. It can be like the traveler who sees the world a dozen times but always has the same experience. The answers we discover may be determined by the questions we bring to the expedition.

The Bible may raise more questions in our lives than it answers. It is, after all, a library of books in two main rooms, and not a single volume. Ours is not a tradition that teaches us to offer simple answers to difficult questions, citing the Bible by chapter and verse. Our experience of church is that it is the place where and time when we try to sort out the trivial from the important...on questions that will guide our lives every hour (24) of every day (7) all year long (365). We know that faith is not about believing unbelievable stuff, without questions or doubts. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith that come with the questions that matter and drive us to grow. Questions keep us moving forward. Faith is lifelong learning about what questions are worth asking. Being a follower of Jesus is learning to walk by faith, which is not being blindfolded or like the carriage horse wearing blinders that keep us from seeing what is going on around us.

Walking by faith is walking in the light, the full and bright light of a resurrection morning when all things are transformed and all shadows disappear. I love the Psalm verse which says that God is the fountain of life; in God's light we see light. (36:9) Some religious traditions discourage questions. Ours encourages and invites every question, because the questions transform us.

Jesus asks what may be one of the most important questions in the whole Bible library: "Who do you say that I am?" This question is directed to you and me as much as to the first disciples at Jesus' feet, Peter, Andrews, James and John and the rest. This is our question. Your question. "Who do you say that I am?" How will you answer? It is a direct question. It is not a matter of repeating something rehearsed, heard from others about who Jesus is. It is directed to you, personally. As the confirmation vow has it, "O God, my God, known to me in Jesus Christ, I give myself to you, as your own..." Faith has children but no grandchildren. We can't follow

Jesus by proxy. Paul wrote to the Romans that in the gospel we are transformed by the renewal of our mind, an experience that stands over against being conformed to the world, a world where we are taught, “you are special, just like everyone else.”

Joy is spelled J for Jesus, O for others and Y for you. This is the order of priority in life that brings joy. I know a man who in his old age has grown bitter and negative and more and more self-centered. He is the dictionary definition of a bigot: one who is intolerant of others' opinions and beliefs. I am saddened by the way his life has shriveled into joylessness because he did not seem to be that way in his younger years. Now his life has narrowed down to himself. He has become completely insensitive and even unaware of those around him. Now it is all about him, and there is no joy there. When I see him, I try to remember how to spell joy: Jesus first, then others, then you. It's not about you, as Rick Warren says in *The Purpose Driven Life*. We are transformed for good when we remember how to spell joy.

When Jesus asks us, “Who do you say that I am?” the priority is on us. Jesus wants to know what your answer is. Here it is about you. This may be the ultimate question of our faith. Who do you say that Jesus is? The paradox is that the more personally and seriously you take this question, the more joy you will find, because if Jesus is your Lord, he will be first, others will come next, and you will take your rightful place, somewhere south of the center of the universe.

“God helps those who help themselves” is not in the Bible. What is in the Bible is this paradox: we help ourselves only as we lose ourselves in the service of others, in the name of the Lord Jesus. (The last shall be first, and the first last.) That's how to spell joy!