

“Who Am I?”

24 November 2019

Text: Luke 7: 1 – 10, Philippians 4: 8-9

Rev. Peter Coutts

Who am I? It is a question that we can deal with on and off throughout the length of our lives. It is a question that we can struggle with in our youth. What am I going to be like? Who will be my gang of friends? We can define ourselves by career paths: that you are an actor, a singer, a politician, from the oilpatch. We can define ourselves by our families. Years ago my sons and I would be introduced as “This is Peter and his boys”. Now, more often than not, introductions go “This is Paul and Daniel, and that’s their dad”. Identity. Our sense of identity can even be rooted simply in our name: “I am Peter Coutts”. I did a LinkedIn search and found 30 Peter Coutts! One’s even a British professional football player. Our names, our roles, our work – these are only some of the ways we answer the question, “Who am I?” But they provide an answer only in part. We are all much more than the money we have and the company we keep, the clothes we wear and the work we do. So how should we answer the question “who am I?”

Perhaps we can approach this question a different way. What if I were to name a few people for you: Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Theresa, Desmond Tutu, Nellie McClung, Pope John Paul II. What makes these people, and others like them, stand out? What categorizes them together? These people were and are people of great Christian conviction. Principled people. People who put those principles into action, intentionally. So much so that they were influential in changing the worlds they lived in. They were people who lived their character. King wanted to see the United States really start living out the Biblical principle that God does not distinguish Jew from Gentile, slave from free – that we are all the same before God. Mother Theresa preached compassion on a worldwide stage that was built on her daily work in Calcutta. Desmond Tutu took his Christian convictions regarding forgiveness and reconciliation to his work chairing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, convinced that reconciliation was the only way forward for this divided nation. Nellie McClung led many social reform initiatives in Canada – from the women’s right to vote to public health care to government family allowance cheques to Temperance – all expressions of Christian compassion that arose from her Methodist roots.

There is an integrity expressed in these lives, where convictions are lived out. The conviction of lived character like this is made even more significant in light of the dramatic failures of character that get paraded across our news on a regular basis. I was in Chicago in 2003 to teach a course to a group of Doctoral students from Seoul Korea. I asked them if they had ever met a Canadian before. Most said no. Then I asked if they knew about any Canadians. Their answer: Ben Johnson, the momentary holder of a world record in the 100-meter dash at the Seoul Korea Olympics, before his gold medal was stripped due to doping. Every one of them knew about Ben Johnson, despite that event occurring 15 years

earlier. In the world of Canadian business, we've recently watched on-going coverage of SNC Lavalin, the engineering firm caught in several unethical practices...and how the Prime Minister's involvement on the legal side of that case called his own character into question for months. When we see what looks like a failure in character and the consequences it becomes so apparent how important the conviction of lived character really is. At the end of the day, this is the best answer to the question, "Who am I?" "I am the convictions, beliefs and values that I hold to be true and live out day by day".

An old gimmick of motivational speakers is to pose this question: "What would you like most to hear your family and friends say at your funeral?" The question prompts us to consider the nature of our character and how we choose to live that out. There's the story of St. Peter greeting two new arrivals at the Pearly Gates with this question: "What would you like most to hear your family and friends say at your funeral?" The first replied, "I would be happy to hear them say that I was an excellent schoolteacher who cared for my students, a wonderful wife and mother, an asset to my community, and a person who lived my faith every day". The second person replied, "I would like to hear them say, Look! He's moving!" But the joke reminds us that we do leave a legacy in how we've lived out our character. The legacy of Christians such as Mother Theresa and Cardinal Desmond Tutu are historic. But even for the likes of you and me – simple Christians who live simple lives – ours can be a legacy that also leaves its smaller mark.

Take the story of the Roman Centurion that we read today. In Jesus' day the Romans were an unwelcome occupying force. Think of Nazi Europe. Roman soldiers were the occupying force. They were the enforcers of Roman rule, which would make them quite unpopular with the people of Judea. A Centurion was an army officer, in charge of the oppression. A centurion would probably be even less popular. But not the one in our story.... who had a popularity rooted in the convictions of his character and the way those convictions were lived out in his life. Jewish elders described him to Jesus as a man who "loves our people". The character of his life was marked by compassion, and he lived that compassion with enough intentionality that he paid to have a synagogue built in the city. A pretty extraordinary thing for a Roman army officer to do. But he was a man of convictions that he lived out in his character. In his small way he changed that corner of the world he lived in, by building a house of prayer and learning for the Jews and being a compassionate law enforcer. Doing that may even a dangerous thing for his career, to be seen as too sympathetic towards the locals. And yet, out of his convictions, he did it all the same. I am guessing that it was this fact that moved Jesus to respond to the request to heal the Centurion's slave. But then we see another aspect of his character: respect. The Centurion knew Jesus was a healer. When Jesus began to go to the Centurion's home, the Centurion sent word, saying, "I am not worthy to receive you in my home...I am not worthy to even approach you." Respect. Apparently it was a respect for the authority Jesus had over the power to heal. So in that message to Jesus he said, "And I get this, for I too am a man granted authority. The authority I have allows me to direct soldiers and slaves. So I know you have authority over the power to heal, and I believe you can do this from where you are, without the need to enter my home." So not just respect,

but also humility before one with authority. This man amazed Jesus, and 2,000 years later we still remember the Centurion's story.

What does Jesus like to see in us? He wants to know that this thing we call faith makes a difference in our lives. It is easy to think that faith is only about belief. But when we think about that, we know that it can't be true. If we believe that God exists, and that God has a hope for a world, and that Jesus Christ was the Son of God who came to teach that hope and die for that hope.... then that means each person of faith is to live out that hope, being God's agent for change by how we live. That's our character.

Today we read, "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you". "Think about these things", Paul writes. This is about character: being just, honourable, pure. How do you do that thinking? Well, for me, I have a question that I ask myself when I find myself in challenging situations. I ask myself, "Who do I want to be in this situation?" That question pre-empts what may be the more typical question, "what am I going to do?" Asking yourself, "who do I want to be?" re-directs your thinking to your character so you think about how you want to show up in the situation you find yourself in. "Who do I want to be?" can lead to answers like: I want to be forgiving...I need to be patient...I need to take the high road here...I have to stand up for what is right, even though others may criticize me for it. This question always takes you back to your core. It helps you live out your character, reflect on your character, develop your character. And if we do that from a faith perspective, it helps us become more Christ-like. And, perhaps, as we do that, Christ will come to see us like he saw the Roman Centurion.