

# **“ONE OF US”**

**Matthew 16:13-20, August 27, 2017**

Twenty-one years ago, in 1996 an American singer and song-writer named Joan Osborne released a song that went straight to the top of the musical charts. It was so popular that it was even nominated for a Grammy Award later that year. The title of the song consists of only three little words: "One of Us."

Friends, this song greatly captured the attention of the wider Christian community because of the penetrating question it asks several times in this song: "What if God was one of us?"

Some Christians saw this song as a door that God was opening for them to witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ—because this is the very central belief of our Christian faith. Indeed, our God has become ONE OF US in the gift of his only-begotten Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Other Christians, however, did not view this song favorably at all because of two statements that follow that ominous question in the song!

What if God was one of us? Just a slob like one of us? Just a stranger on the bus trying to make his way home!"

Why the very idea of anyone referring to Jesus a slob was greatly offensive to them! And the thought that Jesus would ever travel on a bus was equally horrifying to them! But we all have those days, don't we, when we know it means to dress like a slob? I can certainly remember some Mondays, my day off, among the 36 years of my ministry when I was dressed like a slob! I was dressed like a slob because I was working on some type of project at home or maybe because I was working out in the yard on a hot summer's day. It was invariably on those days—when I was dressed like a slob—that I would run up to HOME DEPOT or LOWE'S—just a short distance away—and run into some of you church members here at Mount Olive.

Do think that Jesus' clothing was always spotless; without a wrinkle, and that Jesus' clothing always looked like it had just come to him directly from the dry cleaners?

We know that this is certainly NOT how some of this world's greatest artists have captured their rendition of Jesus throughout history in the pictures they have painted of him! I have difficulty believing that as hard as our Lord worked—that his clothing was always in pristine condition and there were never any stains of dirt upon his face!

Let's remember also that Jesus, during his earthly ministry, often traveled on a boat! Is it really all that inconceivable, therefore, that if he was living among us today in the same way that he lived the people in Palestine in the first century—that Jesus would never ride on a bus? And that in doing so, he would never have appeared to be a stranger to other people riding on that bus? From a human standpoint, in the eyes of many people who really did not know him, Jesus was, at his best, no one more to them initially than a poor itinerate prophet!

**BUT I AM HERE TODAY TO TELL YOU THAT THE BEST-KNOWN QUESTION OF JESUS AND THE BEST-KNOWN ANSWER EVER GIVEN TO ANY OF JESUS' QUESTIONS, GIVEN BY SIMON PETER, ARE BOTH FOUND IN GOSPEL LESSON TODAY (MATTHEW 16:15-16). "JESUS SAID TO**

*THEM, 'BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?' SIMON PETER REPLIED, 'YOU ARE THE CHRIST THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD!'"*

First of all, let me say that I agree with those commentators THAT THE PLACE WHERE JESUS ASKED HIS DISCIPLES THIS QUESTION HOLDS SOME GREAT SIGNIFICANCE. For Matthew tells us that Jesus and his disciples had just entered the District of Caesarea Philippi; a relatively new city near the site of an ancient gathering place for many different types of pagan religions on the slopes of Mount Hermon.

As a footnote, Mount Hermon was then and is still today—the highest point in Galilee—a dormant volcano that provides the only significant ski slopes in modern Israel to people today.

Because of its high altitude and its position in the northern regions of the land, Mount Hermon receives more rain on its slopes than do many other parts of Palestine. The waters not only run down in creeks and streams, but they also sink below the surface to produce springs on the lower skirts of its foothills.

Near Caesarea Philippi there were (and still are today)—springs and streams that create an exceptionally well-watered area. Trees grow in abundance and provide a shaded canopy filled with the sounds of gurgling and trickling waters—and there the birds are forever singing. But this place was significant—not only because of its pleasant park-like settings. Over the centuries a variety of religious sects had used the place as a cultic shrine. They cut niches in the rock walls of the mountain just above the burbling caves and set up statues of their pagan gods whom they thought of as being residents there.

Why it was even there, in that very beautiful place, that HEROD, THE SUPPOSED KING OF THE JEWS, who was always trying to find some way to stay within the good graces of the Roman Empire—had built a temple there—not in honor of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but in honor of no one less than the Caesar of Rome, the Emperor of the Roman Empire.

What if God was one of us? My brothers and sisters, this is the central affirmation of our Christian Gospel that God has met us in a human being, Jesus of Nazareth. But our problem as people who live in this modern world—is that we did not initially meet him the way that Jesus' first disciples met him—who upon first seeing him—only believed that he was another human being like themselves!

Instead, our first real encounters with Jesus, beyond the waters of our Baptism, is probably in someone telling us the Christmas story—when even as little children—we were indoctrinated with the message that this Baby, who was Mary's Baby, was also no one less than the very Son of the living God. Too often people who meet Jesus for the first time today, meet him in the lofty doctrines of the Church, or in the grandeur of a stained-glass window, or when they view him in that classical artist's magnificent rendition of Jesus in a painting from the Middle Ages. Here Jesus is—captured on a canvas—with a golden halo hovering over our Lord's head.

Therefore, it is actually very hard for us to put ourselves in the shoes of Jesus' first disciples, into the shoes of such men as Andrew, Simon Peter, Bartholomew, James and John. And it's equally hard for you women also to put yourselves in the shoes of Mary Magdalene, Johanna, Salome or that other Mary and her sister Martha!

Nevertheless, though Jesus in the eyes of all the other people who caught at least a glance of him initially, certainly appeared to be nothing more than you average—run of the mill—human

being—it was in the Words that our Lord spoke and in the actions our Lord took—that convinced them he had to be more than just a mere human being!

How was it that Jesus could turn water into wine?

How was it that Jesus could speak with such a commanding voice, as One who had a direct-pipeline to God the Father in heaven?

How was it that Jesus' teaching was so powerfully emboldened with a divine sense of authority? That's people said about him you: "He speaks with authority and like the scribes or the Pharisees!"

How was that Jesus' prayers and Jesus' touch could bring so much healing and hope and new life to people, who upon their first meeting him, were people who felt completely down and out—people who had lost all hope—that things in their lives could ever get any better?

And what kind of compassion was this that Jesus possessed—in his constantly inviting all kinds of people with their checkered pasts to become members of this wonderful new community of his followers—that he would more formally establish—as a result of his dying upon the cross for our sins and being raised to new life again three days later?

Among Jesus and his followers, people who were considered only as outcasts and who were excluded from all other places in their society, found a new place of welcome to them. Jesus had been traveling with the disciples: teaching, listening, and reaching out to people in such a way that a profound sense of DIVINE ENERGY WAS BEING RELEASED OUT INTO THE WORLD THROUGH HIM.

What does it mean to say that Jesus is the *Christ*? Yes, the word "Christ" is the Greek word in the New Testament that means primarily "The Anointed One," and is the exact equivalent of the Old Testament Hebrew word "Messiah." BUT IT ALSO SHOULD SIGNAL TO US THAT JESUS WAS MUCH MORE THAN ANY OTHER ORDINARY PERSON.

Just as stars explode and new planets are formed, so in the life of Jesus, Christ's life, the more abundant life he came to bring us, Christ's love, Christ's forgiveness, Christ's mercy and Christ's peace—ARE BEING EXPLODED OUT INTO THE WORLD—so that the real presence of Jesus Christ, as he comes to us in the gift of his Word and Sacraments—and through the ministry of each other is still changing the lives of people everywhere today!

Anyone can say Jesus is the Christ. That's easy. The words are easy. But can you find the energy? It's the energy of Christ that matters most.

I thought about this not too long ago when I read a story about a woman who was alone. Veryill. And she was at home dying of AIDS. It would be hard to overstate how depressed and discouraged she was feeling. A friend was so concerned that she called a priest to come by and visit the woman. I can tell you from personal experience that it doesn't always work so well when somebody calls a minister to visit someone else, but in this case it actually did work.

The woman candidly told the priest: "Look, I've made such a mess of my life. I've made so many mistakes. How could God ever forgive me?"

The priest listened. He said to her, "God can forgive anyone. Anytime. We just have to trust it. Receive it. Let it come close to us."

The woman said, "I think I'm beyond believing it."

At that very moment, the priest happened to notice that on the woman's bedroom dresser was a beautiful picture of a young girl. She looked to be, maybe, 12 years old. He asked the woman, "Who is that little girl in the picture?"

And for the first time in the conversation the woman smiled. She said, "Oh, that's my daughter. She's the only beautiful thing I have left in my life."

The priest said, "And if your daughter made some mistakes and did some things that were wrong and was hurting and broken, wouldn't you forgive her, wouldn't you come close to her and still love her? Wouldn't you still want her to be in your life?"

The woman, whispering now, the woman said: "Yes. Yes. Yes, of course."

And then that priest made a wonderfully astute theological connection. He said, "I want you to know that God has a picture of *you* on God's dresser. And God still loves you. And you are not alone." That is Christ energy. Every time we treat another person with dignity and respect and every time we bring a little compassion to another human being, especially a human being that is hurting and broken, and every time we offer love as a way of life, we bring Christ to others, and the great Christ-burst that started centuries ago continues in our time and in our place.

The Italian writer Ignazio Silone has a line in one of his books that goes like this: "If we treat one another, in the same way that Jesus treated people, it will be as if Jesus never left this world." I think it is so true.

What if God was One of us? My brothers and sisters, in the incarnation of his only-begotten Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, our God has become one of us not to blast us with his judgment but to transform our lives in the beautiful way Paul sets before us in our epistle lesson today!

*"I appeal to your brothers and sisters by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect!"*

*For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith God has assigned. Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. So far as it is possible, live peaceably with all" (Romans 12)! Amen*