

PUSH ME

Here's a wonderful old Jewish story:

When it was time to name their first-born son, a husband and wife began to argue. She wanted to name him after her father; he wanted to name him after his father. Finally they had to call in the Rabbi to settle their quarrel. "What was the name of your father?" the Rabbi asked the husband. "Abijah" "And what was the name of your father?" he asked the wife. "Abijah" "Then what is the problem?" asked the confused Rabbi. "You see Rabbi," said the woman, "my father was a scholar and his father was a horse thief. How can I allow my son to be named after a man like that?" The Rabbi gave very serious thought to it all, for the problem was a delicate one. He didn't want one party to feel it had won and the other that it had lost. So he finally said, "This is what I suggest you do. Call the boy Abijah. Then wait to see if he becomes a scholar or a horse thief, and you will know after whom he was named".

How do you know someone? How do you **really** know someone? Not how do you know this or that about them, but how do you know them? How do you get in touch with what makes a person tick? How do you find out what makes a man or woman a person? I think the Rabbi knew the answer to that question. It's the only answer that makes any sense. Jesus said it too, "By their fruits you will know them".

In the gospel story today Jesus comes home. He comes home to the town in which he had been brought up, and he goes to church. They hand him the scroll and he chooses the reading from Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor....to proclaim release to the captives, sight to the blind, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord".

Every eye was on him. They had heard the stories about this wonder-working young Rabbi, someone they thought they knew all about. Every eye was on him. In the silence Jesus sits down and declares that today this passage of scripture has been made a reality right there in their presence.

Him! The audacity! The people of Nazareth knew this Jesus, yes sir, didn't they? This was Mary and Joseph's boy. They knew him. But Jesus throws that assumption back at them. They didn't know him at all. He wasn't going to fit neatly into their assumption.

Thomas Merton once said, "If you want to know who I am, don't ask about the color of my hair, or the way I walk, or what I do for a living. If you want to know who I am, ask me what I'm living for and they push me into it".

And another quote, this from a poem shared by word of mouth, quoted on the World Wide Web and read aloud at spiritual conferences and other gatherings, "The Invitation" has been passed along by thousands. Ill share part of it with you now.

Titled “The Invitation”

“It doesn’t interest me what you do for a living. I want to know what you ache for and if you dare to dream of meeting your hearts longing. It doesn’t interest me how old you are. I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love, for your dream, for the adventures of being alive. It doesn’t interest me what planets are squaring your moon. I want to know if you have touched the center of your own sorrow, if you have been opened by life’s betrayals or have become shriveled and closed from fear of further pain. I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own, without moving to hide it or fade it, or fix it. It doesn’t interest me where you live or how much money you make. I want to know if you can get up, after the night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone and do what needs to be done to feed the children. It doesn’t interest me where or what or with whom you have studied. I want to know what sustains you from the inside, when all else falls away. I want to know if you can be alone with yourself and if you truly like the company you keep in the empty moments”.

Jesus told the people in the synagogue who he was. He told them what he was living for. And that telling wasn’t enough of course. It never is. At that time, Jesus wasn’t particularly unique, you know, not in what he said. There had been lots of religious teachers in Israel saying pretty much the same things Jesus was saying. People had heard much of this before. No, the thing that made Jesus different was not what he said. The thing that made Jesus different was that he acted consistently as though he really believed it. In Jesus the word and the deed are one thing. That’s something startling.

Jesus declared what he was living for, and allowed himself to be pushed into it. He invited that push. That’s the remarkable thing about Luke’s account of this scene in the synagogue. Jesus isn’t just talking, even in 1st century Palestine, talk was cheap. “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing”.

Here it is folks. You’ve heard about it all these years, the promises in the prophets about how God is coming to set us all free. Here it is. I am doing it. I bear the name and I am making that name a reality. Push me into my name and find out who I am.

It proves to be a very risky name that Jesus carries. It’s a name that belongs to a very risky God. Playing it safe does not seem to be part of God’s standard operating procedure.

Good news to the poor, release to the captives, new sight for the blind; liberty for the oppressed. It all sounds pretty subversive, even revolutionary. And ultimately it was too much for the world to hear.

The name of God is not a name that can be invoked to bless the status quo, a kind of standardized incantation at the end of every political speech. That kind of thing is a pale reflection of Isaiah’s vision if it does not take seriously the risk of unseating our comfortable assumptions about power and who God’s favorites are.

If you want to find out who we are, find out what we're living for and then push us into it. And this applies not just to some specialized religious sphere.....It is social and political. I think it's what great moral leaders from Ghandi to Winston Churchill meant when they said that the measure of any society is how it treats its weakest members.

You and I have received a risky name, a new name. We belong to God's own family. We are born into the body of God and named as sons and daughters of God. We hear the name and we hear the responsibility of the name. That name tells us who we are.

How will the world know who we are? How will the world know our identity? What are we living for, as a church, as families, as individuals? Let us stand with Jesus. Let us live for the poor, the blind, the oppressed...whenever we find them in our lives. Let the scriptures continue to be fulfilled in our hearing. Let us live so the world will find out what we're living for, and then push us into it.