
Eclipsing Identities

Matthew 16:13-20

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Sunday, August 27, 2017,
by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

In the past couple of weeks, we've experienced the intermingling of immanence and transcendence, the earthly and the heavenly. Just a few things have been happening in our world, nation, community, and on campus, right at the Duke Chapel entrance. There have been rallies, racism, and ridiculous violence and name-calling. There have been debates and protests over confederate monuments and statues. Torches and tempers flaring. Op-eds and perpetual opining in the media. Calls for justice and jail time over the Internet and on the streets. Police and other people in tense tear gas encounters. Just a few things have been happening on the earth and there are immanent concerns.

But just when you thought the prominence of immanence would prevail, this past Monday arrived and all eyes and minds were drawn upward to the heavens as if someone pushed a pause button on the existential and national pain. People drove far distances to get a perfect glimpse of the solar eclipse. Work days were interrupted to see it. Sunglasses were purchased, and checked for authenticity, to ensure safety. The Chapel staff wasn't immune to the craze and we went to what I call "the upper room," to the top of the chapel tower to watch it. From that tower, I could see other members of the Duke community stretched out on the quad, standing, lying down, together in groups, all looking up at the eclipse. In that moment, all attention was above the seemingly mundane, above the messiness of our human existence. All were looking toward the light. It didn't matter if you were from rural North Carolina or urban city centers, Appalachia or Arizona or Athens, Georgia. It was the one miraculous moment that a Tarheel could sit next to a Blue Devil and not talk trash (and tell lies about how they were going to beat us in football this season). All were drawn to the light above, regardless of the previous week's events. Democrat and Republican, Southerner and northerner, Black and white, Latino, Asian, Presbyterian and Pentecostal and all of the various Baptists.

We all looked higher, beyond ourselves, beyond our plight, to the light that would show us our real selves, that is, how small we actually are in the universe, that we are dust and to dust we shall return, and that there is more out there than arguments about statues and statutes. There is mystery, there is glory, there is awe, there is light. There's more to this universe than we can ever imagine. The Breton Fisherman's prayer, which President John F. Kennedy kept on his desk in the Oval Office, is so relevant: "Dear God, be good to me, the sea is so wide and my boat is so small." We are so small and the universe is so big. The solar eclipse was transcendent even while we may have been dealing with immanent societal concerns. The event of the eclipse eclipsed, for many, whatever else might have been happening at that moment—meetings, work deadlines, urgent emails or phone calls. Something beyond, something bigger, was calling us beyond ourselves and we turned our attention to it with sunglasses and cameras and many did so in community. We looked away from ourselves and the commonplace to an awesome sacred space, reminding us of a higher calling. Something higher broke through our sociopolitical entrenchments and self-importance.

And something, someone, higher wants to break through this morning. Jesus wants to break through all of the “jangling echoes of our turbulence” (Howard Thurman) to ask us a question, “Who do you say that I am?” He wants our attention because the media isn’t giving it to him, so we better do it at church in more than 140 characters. When Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” he’s calling for our attention to look beyond ourselves to his light. He’s calling us back to the center of our faith. In a recent *Christian Century* essay, Craig Barnes, President of Princeton Seminary, wrote about a controversy there and noted “that [this seminary] community is centered in Christ. We all belong to him. If we are clear about that, we don’t have to worry about the boundaries because the center will always hold.” The center is Jesus, who he is and what he does. But I don’t hear that breaking through the cacophony of hateful refrains. Jesus can barely get a word or question in amid all of our talking heads. It may be a good time to take the advice of some of our past teachers who taught, “It is better to appear stupid than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.” Jesus is the center and he’s the focus from the very beginning of the gospel of Matthew where his genealogy is laid out in detail—A was the father of B and B was the father of C and C was the father of D and Jesus was born, who was the Messiah. “Who do you say that I am?” He poses the question to his closest confidantes because he knows that sometimes those closest to us may not truly know us either. When Peter pipes up on behalf of the disciples as a whole, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God,” it’s as if Jesus pours out a rock steady blessing on him. Peter is blessed for putting the focus on the identity of Jesus as the Messiah.

I realize that there may be other things on your mind. We are at the beginning of a new academic year at dear old Duke and last Monday seems far away as classes are about to get started. So, for students in particular, other things are about to eclipse the eclipse. A lot of focus, especially for first year students, has been on the quotidian— signing up for classes, getting Duke IDs, opening up bank accounts, meeting with faculty advisors, discovering where new classes are located, following bus schedules, getting used to campus food (I highly recommend Tandoor Indian food in West Union), getting used to dorm life, learning that your roommate snores and has peculiar cleaning habits, finding your way around campus and Durham. Then of course, meeting new people and making new friends, getting to know each other, so there’s lots of questions about your identity, about who you are. What is your hometown? What high school did you attend? What are your academic interests? Do you play sports? Are you involved in or interested in any clubs? What do you like to read? Do you have hobbies? Why did you choose Duke? What other schools were options for you? Tell me about your family—any siblings? Are you a carnivore, vegetarian, vegan or on a seafood diet—you see food and you eat it? There’s a lot of focus on *you* at this point.

And there are many affinity groups and you’ll identify with some of them as part of who you are. But remember that although we may identify with particular groups and they will function as identity markers, as humans we are always more complex, more beautiful than any one totalizing category. Golf player Tiger Woods calls himself, ‘Cablinasian,’ representing his mixed ethnic heritage of Caucasian, Black, American Indian, and Asian. Some weren’t happy about Tiger’s name for his identity but he was trying to make a point. When it comes to identity politics, our categories will always fall short—progressive, conservative, liberal, evangelical, mainline. Whatever our affinity, I hope it doesn’t distance our proximity to our humanity. We are human, not an identity marker.

When a society or institution is so fixated on identities, it can create an objectified group to be stereotyped and controlled. This is why when it comes to denominational identity, I sometimes will say that I’m a Reformed Methodist! Some may take that as saying, ‘I’m confused’ but I use it to clearly say, ‘I’m Christian’ regardless of the particular denominational identity. I refuse to be

pigeonholed in a corner when I know that I embody much more than one descriptor or one identity nor do I want to be barricaded inside any identity for self-protection or self-worth. We can get so locked into who *we* are, that we forget whose we are and who he is.

There's a story about a middle-aged woman who had a heart attack and was taken to the hospital. While on the operating table she had a near-death experience. During that experience, she saw God and asked if this was it. God said 'No' and explained that she had another 30-40 years to live. Upon her recovery, she decided to just stay in the hospital and have a face lift, liposuction, breast augmentation, and a tummy tuck. She even had someone come in and change her hair color. She figured that since she had another 30 or 40 years she might as well make the most of it. But when she walked out the hospital after her last operation, she was hit and killed by an ambulance speeding up to the hospital. She arrived in front of God again and asked, "I thought you said I had another 30-40 years?" God replied, "Sorry, I didn't recognize you."

We can get so lost in ourselves or lose ourselves so much that we become unrecognizable even to ourselves and in the process of self-consumption, we forget Jesus and his question that calls us back to him, "Who do you say that I am?" The disciple Peter gets chastised for not setting his mind on divine things but on human things. I think this can be the case with us sometimes—so consumed with our identities, our debates, our political affiliations, our groups, our rightness, we neglect the one who can save us right in front of us in Caesarea Philippi, North Carolina. If we are more interested in pledging allegiance to the nation and our bloodline, our basketball team, our alma mater, than to the cross of Christ, we will easily go down the path toward the supremacy of *our* people, *our* land, *our* nation, *our* tribe, *our* team, bowing at the altar of our own identities rather than at the wounded feet of Jesus. If we think life is rooted in our lives, we've lost our way because there is a theological eclipse. "Who do you say that I am?" Who the son of God is, eclipses who we are.

Life is discovered by losing your life, not by holding on to it so tightly. This becomes so clear when you know who Jesus is. If you know who he is, you can understand more fully where you are going, if you choose to follow. If you don't, you may think who you are trumps Jesus rather than finding yourself in him, losing your life to gain your life. This isn't the erasure of your identity or particularities but the reception of an authentic self found in him. After Peter answers the question of Jesus, Jesus "sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah." Jesus orders the disciples to not tell anyone and he's dead serious about this because he knows that he will suffer death for it. Right after he speaks to Peter, we learn that "from that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised." He's not just a miracle-making Messiah; he's a messy one because his innocent blood will be spilled.

Jesus keeps this secret close because not everyone can be trusted with your identity. He knows that some will taunt you and kill you for who you really are. Self-revelation is a risky business, especially for Jesus. Jesus was about to be persecuted for who he was. He wasn't safe around everyone. But that's not surprising because following Jesus isn't safe; it will save you, even though it means following a messiah who dies, which leads to your own death. I realize this is a great topic as you begin to study at Duke and you anticipate all of the upcoming work—prepare to die!! Who you say that Jesus is says something about who you are and who you are willing to be and what you are willing to risk as a follower of Jesus.

Being a Christian doesn't mean you will kill because it's a nonviolent way at its core, but it does mean you will die, you will experience hardships and suffering yet you will receive power to endure, the power to die. You won't be the one in power per se but you will receive power from Christ, such strength that even the gates of Hades, the power of death, will not eventually prevail. In him, you will also rise, rise to be a genuine witness for Christ.

Jesus told his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah so their witness to this open secret was not necessarily with words. Even as a preacher, I agree with poet Edgar Guest that "I'd rather see a sermon than hear one any day." The lives of the disciples of Jesus, as one biblical scholar notes, "will speak louder, more truthfully, and more effectively than their words....by the life they live, a life of love for God, a life that loves the other as much as one loves herself, and a life in pursuit of justice and peace" (Mitzi Smith). We show who he is by who we are and by what we do. There's so much lip service in the church about justice, equity, and race relations and reconciliation but I wonder whether our life service matches our lip service? I wonder if we are those who affirm the existence of God with our lips but deny God's existence with our life.

We need more light. The light of Jesus. And his light can eclipse the life we are living with the life and light that wants to live in and through us! We need a theological eclipse, not one in which light is covered but one in which the light of Christ eclipses all the darkness we see happening in the world and even in our lives. A light for all people. The light of the world that shines all around us by day and by night. A light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness can't overcome it. The preeminent light of lights, Jesus Christ, the world's light.

In *The Lord of Rings*, the young hobbit, Frodo Baggins, is entrusted with the fate of the world because he has to destroy a ring of evil. He's fearful and tells his wizard friend, Gandalf, "I wish the ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened." Gandalf replies: "So do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us." What will you do with the light of Christ in you? That is the question and I hope this is your answer:

*This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine
This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine
Let it shine, let it shine,
Let it shine!*