

“Who’s Who”
Mark 9:33-37
September 23, 2018

Julia Ward Howe, the composer of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, tells this story. One day, she had invited one of the senators from her state to meet a friend of hers. At this point in her career, the composer had achieved a certain celebrity status, and had easy entrée to the halls of power. She rarely used this access for her own benefit, but was not shy about using her connections to promote causes, such as women’s suffrage, which she found to be worthy of her attention. So, she contacted her Senator – who replied in the kind of arrogance that only life in Washington D.C. can bestow – that he would not accept her invitation, for he had “gotten beyond taking an interest in individuals.” Mrs. Howe commented in her diary that not even God Almighty had gotten beyond such a point.

I suspect that if the Senator had only known who he really was, and who he wasn’t, that his mindset would have been a lot different. Who ARE we? We are thundering through the universe at inconceivable speeds. We face grief as well as joy, sickness as well as health, both death and life. We often do not know where we stand, where to turn ... but we all too often feel how fragile our existence is. And precious few of us feel the serenity, the security, which we suspect so many others have been granted.

And we often feel so alone in the universe, which doesn’t seem all that friendly too often. Many of us wonder, “Does God really care about little old me?” We figure that God has enough to worry about, settling wars, speaking to prophets, running the show we call the universe. How could God have any time for much of anything else?

But while I’m the first to say that there is no such thing as a dumb question, I’m quick to wonder if the questions we are asking are really the right questions. Because I find that too often the question is not, “Is God too busy for me?” but rather “Am I too busy for God?” while theologians love to ask the question “Who is God?” ... but I’m afraid that God can take care of himself. The question really is, “Who are we?”

When the children of Israel were struggling to understand what it meant to be a Chosen People, they soon discovered that once they could answer the question as to who God is, they were then equipped to answer the question about who they were. One of the prophets framed the issue this way: “Look to the rock whence you are hewn,” thus calling Israel to look back to their beginnings as a nation under the fatherhood of Abraham and the motherhood of Sarah. The prophet Isaiah then reminds us that God was able to take just these two persons, and to raise up from them an entire nation.

Can we not see how important even the fewest of us can be? If God could act through one or two individuals like Abraham and Sarah to do great deeds, what do we think God might do with us, here? True, there may be only a few dozen of us. But out of acorns come oak trees, and as the prophet Zechariah warns, we are not to despise the day of small things.

What God can do, however, will partially depend upon how we see ourselves. The children of Israel came perilously close any number of times to rejecting God. Jacob, who was Abraham’s grandson, would wrestle with an angel all night long on the banks of the River Jabbok, refusing to accept God’s rule in his life. Similarly, the people in some of the villages of Galilee would render Jesus’ power to perform miracles neutral because of their unbelief.

God has made great things, and can continue to make great things, of our congregation. God can work wonders THROUGH us – though not necessary FOR us. God can reveal himself through us, not because we are righteous or pure, but because we have been forgiven. God can bring his Word to those beyond these four walls surrounding us here by the words we speak, the deeds we act out, and the attitudes and thoughts which we project.

But first, we have to come to a realization as to who we are. Are we God’s servants, or are we self-serving? Are we able to trust God, truly trust him – or do we not really believe that we are God’s children? Are we people who can affirm that God and his word stand forever, and are what really matters – or do we place our trust in lesser

realities that can vanish like smoke, or melt like wax, or rust away like gold or silver? Do we rely on God's grace, or are we people who trust our own resources?

If we are not really sure, God asks only one thing: hear him out. Be reminded that God makes himself available to all who would approach him. Rest assured that God seeks not to reject us, but to perfect us. Consider that God gave himself, in all graciousness, so that we might in turn give of ourselves to others.

How much has God given? C. H. Spurgeon, one of the great preachers of another century, spoke of an evening when he was returning home after a heavy day's work. Spurgeon, who was a Baptist preacher serving a Congregational church in London, felt weary and depressed, when suddenly as a lightning flash came the words of II Corinthians 12:9: "My grace is sufficient for thee."

Spurgeon reflected in his commentary on this verse, writing: It was as if some little fish, being very thirsty, was troubled about drinking the river dry ... and the river said, Drink away! My stream is sufficient for thee.

Or (Spurgeon's commentary continues), it seemed like a mouse in the granaries of Egypt after seven years of plenty, feared it might die of the coming famine – and Joseph might say, Cheer up! My granaries are sufficient for thee.

Or a man on a mountain might say to himself, I fear I shall exhaust all the oxygen in the atmosphere. But the earth might say, Breathe, O man, and fill thy lungs; my atmosphere is sufficient for thee.

So does God tell us who he is – All-bountiful, all-giving, all-gracious, all-loving. In the light of that knowledge, we can then ask ourselves the question, Who are we? Are we ready to partake of God's goodness – or will we seek something else? Are we ready to see the light that shines before us, or are we having more fun in the darkness of our own making?

In a way, it is all a question of trust. Isaiah reminds us that God already knows who we are, for he says to Zion, "Thou art my people." If we assent to that, heaven – if not earth – is ours. If we truly become God's people, then the life that Paul speaks of in Romans, that can be ours through the coming of one man, Jesus, is within our grasp. If

we answer the call of Isaiah, and affirm that we are God's, then God's love, blessing, and mercy, become ours.

But it all depends on how we answer the question "Who are we? Why is this congregation here? What is our purpose? What can we achieve?" May God grant us his answers to a world that seeks wisdom, purpose, and meaning. And may we, having answered the question of who WE are, move from strength to strength, fighting the good fight, knowing that God's triumph is assured.