

June 18, 2023
Third Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 6, Year A, Track 1
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St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7
Psalm 116:1, 10-17
Romans 5:1-8
Matthew 9:35-10:23

Last week's most surprising news story came from a surprising source: the television game show *Jeopardy*. I was an incident that happened on Tuesday's episode, which was hosted by Mayim Bialik. The category was "Dadjectives"—which I take to mean adjectives used to describe fathers. The first clue in the category, or "Dadjectives for \$200," was this: "Matthew 6:9 says, 'Our father which art in heaven,' this 'be thy name.'" The response was ... silence. None of the three contestants even buzzed in with a guess. The answer is, of course, "What is hallowed?" It had to be provided by Bialik.¹ Of course, we all know that comes from the Lord's Prayer.

The news coverage focused less on the incident and more on the social media storm that immediately erupted. In headlines, fans of the show were described with a variety of adjectives—or, since the category was "Dadjectives," let's call them "fanjectives"—including fuming, stunned, appalled, and baffled. As for me, I was surprised, but then I wasn't. Why should the contestants know the answer? Despite the invective, and despite what some contend, America was not founded to be a Christian nation, and Christianity is on the decline. *Jeopardy* host Bialik herself is Jewish.

On Friday night, I went to a party in Old Saybrook. For over three years, I have been participating in classes streamed from the Jazzercise center in Old Saybrook. Gretchen, the owner, founded that Jazzercise franchise 35 years ago, and she threw a party at her home to celebrate. At the beginning of the pandemic, soon after everything was shut down, Gretchen got all her instructors streaming their classes. I have been joining those streamed classes since nearly the start. I'd only ever met her or the other instructors on Zoom. A handful of us remain devoted streaming attendees, so streaming continues, thank goodness. I went to the party so I could thank Gretchen and the other instructors in person for helping to preserve my sanity during some very dark days and for doing so even now.

I'm glad I went, but honestly, it was a little unsettling. Everyone looked different than I'd expected; I barely recognized them. I realized that I haven't yet returned to my pre-pandemic socializing groove—my inner introvert seems to be on overdrive. I didn't know any of the other students, and I barely knew the instructors, so the conversation was a bit awkward. But that's partly because of what happened the times I answered the question of what I do for a living. It would go something like this. I meander over to a group of two or three others. One of them asks, "What do you do for a living?" I answer, "I'm a minister, an Episcopal priest." And they stand there like those three *Jeopardy* contestants, buzzers in hand, frozen in place. There is literally no response.

Maybe I'm misremembering, but those reactions seemed more stifled than before the pandemic. It could have been me—my imagination, or my mood, or my vibe. But I think it was them. I think it very likely that people in this area are even more Christian-phobic than they were three years ago. I'm pretty sure that I am. You've probably heard the term *internalized homophobia*. I'm gay but I don't think I suffer from that. But I may very well be carrying around some *internalized Christian-phobia*. Fear of other Christians is definitely keeping me away from large swaths of the country right now. I don't think it's just me. If I as an ordained minister carry internalized Christian-phobia, then it seems a safe bet that many non-Christians carry their own particular brand of externalized Christian-phobia.

I've been thinking about all this in light of today's reading from Matthew. By the time the gospel was written down, Jesus had been dead a half-century. Over that half-century, from that first dozen followers of Jesus had sprouted a mycelium of believers. The going surely wasn't always easy. The gospel as it was written down likely reflects the lived reality of believers up to that point, even if that experience is projected back in time and into the text. In other words, the gospel as we received it reflects the situation at the time of its writing. We might suppose that the author was addressing both a lack of knowledge about Jesus, and also the Christian-phobia that was already present in the culture. We might even suppose that it came in both internal and external varieties.

This reading from Matthew is long and complicated. There's a lot packed into it, and I'm not going to try to unpack it. It's one of those readings with a lot of disparate parts, each of which begs some scholarly explanation. But I don't want to get bogged down in scholarship. Instead, I want to try to pull it all together by noticing this: the situation then seems rather like the situation today. If so, then maybe the suggested response then is the same today. And the bottom line of that response is pretty simple: there is much to do; just do it. Heal those you can; proclaim the good news. No justification; no discussion. No foul; no hurt. Just do it; just let it all go; and then just do it again.

When faced with people who find spirituality everywhere but in religion, I sometimes have to remind myself why I am a Christian, why I am *still* a Christian. It's not because I'm scared of going to hell, or because I think that non-Christians are going to go there; my reasons are much more nuanced than that. Once I set out to remind myself of what they are, reminders seem to just pop up on their own, out of nowhere, sometimes exactly when I need them. When I get those reminders of why I am a Christian, I am inordinately grateful.

For example, I got a pop-up reminder on Trinity Sunday. At the beginning of his sermon two weeks ago, Bishop Jeff commented that no priest complains about being let off the hook from preaching on Trinity Sunday; church lore has it that no priest likes having to preach that day. Actually, I am the exception who proves the rule. I don't at all mind preaching on Trinity Sunday, because the Trinity is so important to my theology, for the reasons that Bishop Jeff spoke about and more. Even if I don't fully understand the Trinity, I feel confident in saying this: our God contains an intrinsic relationality that is *directed to* and *reflected in* all of creation. The Trinity is one big reason I am a Christian.

I got another pop-up reminder of why I'm a Christian last week, in the form of an image that showed up one day in one of my social media feeds. For the last couple of weeks, the personal posts and paid advertisements in my social media feeds have included lots of photos of people wearing Pride-related t-shirts. The particular one that caught my eye last week was in some ways fairly typical: it was a black t-shirt with rainbow lettering. What stood out was what the lettering said, which I don't remember seeing before. Those particular rainbow letters on black spelled out simply, "Imago dei." *Imago dei*, image of God. The person wearing such a shirt is making a simple declaration, without question or argument. Like a carton labeled "Milk" or a jar labeled "Peanut Butter," here's what this package contains: the image of God. I began to imagine every person here today wearing that t-shirt. I began to imagine every person I come into contact with wearing that t-shirt. The concept of *imago dei* is another big reason I am a Christian.

All that's me, but let's talk at least a little bit about you. I don't know what it is about God or Jesus or the Gospel message that makes you a Christian; I don't know what it is about church that keeps you coming back here instead of going to a coffee shop to read *The New York Times* on Sunday mornings. You don't need to tell me, but you might want to remind yourself: Why *are* you a Christian. Simply putting it out there will, I think, open your heart to the possibility of surprising returns. I don't think it's just an intellectual exercise; it's a means of resolving both internal and external Christian-phobia; I think it's the route to inner peace and stillness. Especially in these continually awkward and uncertain transitional times, we need that inner peace and stillness, so that we can just do it.

Notes

¹ This was during episode of *Jeopardy* broadcast on June 13, 2023. A clip is available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyvCdOAJ8Nk> (accessed June 18, 2023).