

**Who Are You?**  
**Sunday, February 27, 2022, 11:30 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena**  
**The Rev. Mike Kinman**

Hear the Gospel according to Pete Townsend:

“Who are you? Who, who, who, who?”

“I know there's a place you walked  
Where love falls from the trees  
My heart is like a broken cup  
I only feel right on my knees  
I spit out like a sewer hole  
Yet still receive your kiss  
How can I measure up to anyone now  
After such a love as this?”

“Well, who are you?”

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The simplest questions are the most profound.

Who are you?

A while ago, Zendaya, singer, actor and executive producer and star of the HBO series Euphoria tweeted to her fans:

“Don’t try so hard to fit in, and definitely don’t try so hard to be different. Just try hard to be you.”

On its own, it sounds like the kind of simple advice we give children and youth all the time.

Just be yourself.  
You do you.

As if it were that easy.

Except if you have seen Euphoria ... which takes you into the world of a group of high school students as they struggle with issues of identity and relationships, drugs, sex and violence ... you know that Zendaya understands what every middle and high school student knows ... that “being you” is anything but easy.

That even knowing who you are is anything but easy.

That you really have to try hard to be you because it is excruciatingly difficult just to be ourselves in a world that insists we conform to its own narrow expectations of who we should be.

Yes, the simplest of questions can be the hardest.

Who are you?

For all of us, it begins at the earliest age. Maybe it's a pink or blue cap in the hospital nursery. We instinctively realize there are expectations of us and just as instinctively sense that our acceptance, our lovability, and perhaps even our survival depends on living into those expectations.

And thus begins a lifelong struggle between who we are expected to be ... the faces we show the world ... and who we truly are.

And we develop survival skills in this struggle. We learn to cover ... to pass ... to code-switch ... and to assimilate.

And the more who we really are differs from the dominant culture, the more we have to contort ourselves to survive.

And it's not even that simple. Because who we are ... well, even that is hard to define. Our lives become rabbit warrens of closets, each of which feels like staring into a funhouse mirror.

Over time, we can learn the art of preservation through presentation so well that we can even begin to believe that the outside matches the inside, even if it really doesn't. The prison cell becomes so familiar we can pretend it is the home of our choosing.

Except then there are these moments.

Brief moments.

Powerful moments.

Holy moments where the truth breaks through.

Moments where we have the gift of the experience of deep dissonance – moments where who we are trying to be grates so profoundly against who we truly are that we cannot escape the jarring feeling of self-betrayal.

These can be moments of terror. Moments where all meaning to our lives can be called into question.

Often, when we experience these moments, we try to make them stop as quickly as possible. Not only to make sure nobody else sees them but even to hide them from ourselves.

And so often we anesthetize or distract ourselves to get away from them. Anything to restore a sense of coherence to our lives. Anything to silence the question for which we have no answer.

Who are you?

Pete Townsend had one of those moments.

He had just finished an excruciatingly long meeting with a record company executive that had ended with him receiving a huge royalty check for The Who's music. Beginning to wrestle with the inner voices that were telling him that he was selling out his true self for the money, he wandered into a bar to try to numb that pain.

Only there, he ran into Paul Cook and Steve Jones of the Sex Pistols, who began telling him how grateful they were for Pete and The Who for paving the way for punk rock music. Praising him for being so authentic.

So here he was, listening to these two icons of music risk and rebellion, lauding him for being brave while he was holding a huge check for corporate royalties in his pocket.

It was too much for him to bear. Facing Paul and Steve was like looking in a mirror and seeing the person he truly thought he should be. The person he truly thought he was.

And then looking at who he was pretending to be. Looking at who he had become, he could only ask himself the question that became the song.

Who are you?

"Who are you?" is among the most powerful questions we can ask ourselves or each other. And sometimes it comes in moments like that one for Pete Townsend. Moments of deep dissonance where we may not be able to answer the question positively ... and all we know is the answer is "not this."

And then there are other moments.

Brief moments.

Powerful moments.

Holy moments where the truth breaks through.

Moments where we have the gift of the experience of deep resonance – moments where we have an experience that is so true, so real that we know it is the answer.

That even for a brief moment, we know yes ... this is good.

This is right.

This is true.

This is me.

Sometimes these moments happen when we are all by ourselves ... when we have an epiphany that feels like our heart is going to burst out of our chest and take flight. For even an instant, the barrier separating our inner from our outer selves falls away and there is an integrity and unity to our whole being that maybe we have never felt before.

We know who we are.

Sometimes these moments happen with another person – someone who is able to see us for who we are in ways we cannot yet see ourselves. Maybe this is what the experience of soul mates is about ... someone who instinctively understands the deepest, truest parts of us and longs not for who we pretend to be but for who we truly are. And we catch just a glimpse of that person reflected in their eyes.

Sometimes these moments happen in community – with people who become the safe container where we can ask that terrifying question, explore beyond the demands of others' expectations, trust that who we really are is not only ok but deeply, deeply, deeply beloved.

When we have these moments, even for the briefest of moments, we know the answer.

Even for the briefest of moments, we know who we are.

And in those moments, even for the briefest of moments ... we shine with the glow of the God who dwells in each of us. The God who is incarnated in our deepest, truest selves. The God who makes our souls sing as Pete Townsend of his own encounter with the divine

“I know there's a place you walked  
Where love falls from the trees  
My heart is like a broken cup  
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Yet still receive your kiss  
How can I measure up to anyone now  
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Facing moments like this takes incredible courage. It takes the strongest of hearts, the strongest of relationships, the strongest of communities to turn these moments into movements for liberation.

Because what follows the moment is the realization of the distance between here and there. The challenge of making that journey. The revolution on whose doorstep being faithful to this epiphany places us.

And yet that moment is also pregnant with possibility. It is the moment where we can imagine “what if?” before the daunting reality of how we get there comes crashing down.

What if I could actually be true to myself?  
 What if I could actually know and be who I am?  
 What if I could actually feel this true,  
 this loved,  
 this free  
 ... all the time.

Transgender activist Leslie Feinberg writes of “feel(ing) the pleasure of the weightless state between here and there.” Of resting in that moment of possibility and in that moment discovering that this was not an individual experience. Discovering that “my right to be me is tied with a thousand threads to your right to be you.”

And it is no accident that Leslie speaks about this so eloquently, for this gift of the epiphany that there is a disjuncture between our outward and inward selves that doesn’t have to be this way, and the witness of the courage it takes not only to name but claim our truest identity, to love that truest identity, fully to live into that truest identity is part of the deep gift those among us who are transgender have for the rest of this body. Why those among us who are transgender are indispensable to the body of Christ, with a life and witness indispensable to each and all of our liberation.

Those among us who are trans are uniquely equipped to be the gathered community’s Sherpas on this courageous journey of rejecting all that the world tells us we are and claiming all that God knows that we are. The courageous journey of confounding expectations and shedding shackles that comes from singing the answer to the question

Who. Are. You?

In this morning’s Gospel reading, Jesus takes three friends, three people whom he most deeply hopes he can trust, and they go up on the mountain to pray. And while he is praying, something happens to Jesus. The scripture says his face is “altered.” The Greek word Luke uses is *heteros*, which literally means “he becomes the other.”

Who are you?

Jesus says: No, I am not this. I am not what you have been seeing.

Yes, I am this. I am what I have always been inside. I am the other and the other is me. Only now there is no other ... because now I know my inside and my outside can be the same.

Now there is no other because I can live and sing and love with integrity.

Now there is no other, there is only God shining fully through me ... the person I have always been created to be.

Queer author and activist Sam McKenzie, Jr. notes the text says:

“Jesus was glowing during the transfiguration. The transfiguration was a spiritual Snapchat and Jesus let people see why He’s hot.

When the inside matches the outside ... as it did in the transfiguration ... it is a glorious experience.”

Transgender people understand intimately and in a unique way what we all believe as followers of Jesus ... “that we ... and the world we live in ... are changed from the inside out.”

“And conversely, just like Jesus, when transgender people are not allowed to be themselves it is soul crushing.”

So say we all.

The transfiguration is not just a revelation of who Christ is ... it is the good news of the hope and possibility of liberation for us all. That the forces that try to limit us and define us cannot stand against the power of the love of a God who created us and continues to create us anew.

Jesus has a mountaintop experience. He has that amazing glimpse of who he is and who he can be.

And it is powerful, and it is good.

And he feels “the pleasure of the weightless state between here and there.”

And the disciples realize that they are on that holy ground of integrity and joy, where we are allowed to claim and be who we fully are in ways that anywhere else would draw the ire and condemnation and violence of the world.

And so, they urge him to stay in that space. But as important as those moments of revelation and truth are, they are never the end of the journey.

And going down the mountain is scary. Once you realize who you are, it is terrifying going down the mountain to a place that refuses to see and recognize you. That doesn’t see or embrace the possibilities for a life where our outsides match our insides.

For the truth of the transfiguration is nothing short of revolutionary. For the world politically and economically runs not on who we really are but on who powerful people and systems tell

us we are. And it is heavily invested in us never ever realizing the power of the truth of who we really are.

The countless instances of imperialism and colonialism from our deepest history even unto today. Not just what is happening in Ukraine but what is happening and has happened in Iraq, Afghanistan, Myanmar, the Congo, Nicaragua, El Salvador and more. The capitalist economy that makes billionaires out of defense contractors, keeps us in states of perpetual conflict and convinces us that we are what we produce ... all of these are instances of principalities and powers attempting to deny children of God the ability to be who we truly are and impose definitions and roles on us that serve their own needs.

And it is all in desperate need of transfiguration.

And the only way that will happen is if we begin to name it and struggle against it.

Because, as Leslie Feinberg continues, "Struggle informs theory, and theory in turn counsels action. That's why those at the summits of power do everything they can to ridicule and condemn and censor these ideas."

That's why those at summits of power do everything they can to keep us from looking at ourselves deeply and asking that most transformative, transfiguring of questions:

Who are you?

Yes, living down the mountain is scary.

It's easy to be hopeless.

It's easy to be frustrated.

It's tempting to become cynical.

We have been through so much.

We have lost so much.

We know it doesn't have to be this way and yet everywhere we look we see things getting worse and worse.

And we are tired.

I love how in this morning's Gospel, when Jesus is confronted by the crowd's inability to heal someone his first reaction is not meek and mild compassion but shouting in frustration: "You unbelieving and perverse generation! How much longer must I be with you and put up with you?"

How many times just even this week have we looked at what is happening in our nation and the world and wanted to shout to the heavens, "How much longer must I be here and put up with this!?!"

I hear Jesus shouting that and I've gotta tell you, right or wrong, for good or for ill, I feel seen!

And ... Jesus doesn't stop there.

Jesus, out of his own experience of realizing who he is.

Jesus, out of his own experience of having his outside match his inside.

Jesus out of his own experience of transition looks on the child and sees not the demon that is possessing him but sees the child for who they really are.

And Jesus heals them. Jesus restores them to wholeness.

And then Jesus reconnects them with their community.

And that's the good news. That we can be seen and known. And being seen and known we can be healed and made whole.

That we do not have to be imprisoned by the expectations and norms of a world that seeks to control us for its own ends.

That we are not condemned forever to a life of covering, passing, code-switching and assimilating.

That the world can be changed one person, one transfiguration, one transition at a time.

That together we can love each other to that place where our outsides match our insides.

That together we can claim the freedom that comes from answering the most basic of questions:

Who are you?

Amen.