

"Rumors Versus Reality"
Matthew 16:13-20
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In 2005, Walter Bruggemann developed what he called, 19 Theses, to describe and critique the American culture in the same way Luther critiqued the Catholic Church. Bruggemann shared these with a group of pastors at a conference and there are several versions posted online by several note-takers; I found out only recently that they were also published in a Christian Century article titled "Counterscript: Living with an Elusive God" (November 29, 2005). I am not going to read his theses, they will be in the copy,[i] but here is the crux of it: Bruggemann says we are "scripted" or given a dominant narrative of safety and happiness, via "nurture, formation and socialization; he says it happens with or without our knowing it," through propaganda, advertising, and "the liturgy of television." "The dominant script in our society," he says, "is one of therapeutic technological consumer militarism."

In The Christian Century he explained that he uses the term "therapeutic to refer to the assumption that there is a product or a treatment or a process to counteract every ache and pain and discomfort and trouble, so that life may be lived without inconvenience." In the term technological, he refers to "the assumption that everything can be fixed and made right through human ingenuity; there is no issue so complex or so remote that it cannot be solved." Consumerist, here means "we live in a culture that believes that the whole world and all its resources are available to us without regard to the neighbor, that assumes more is better and that "if you want it, you need it." Thus there is now an advertisement that says: 'It is not something you don't need; it is just that you haven't thought of it'." And, he concludes, "The militarism that pervades our society exists to protect and maintain the system and to deliver and guarantee all that is needed for therapeutic technological consumerism."

To Bruggemann's work, I would add the insights of two local theologians. First, United Seminary professor Eleazar Fernandez wrote in 2011, "We are living in a confessional situation ... and this situation must inform the way we think, dwell, and act. If imperial Rome was the empire in Paul's time, our contemporary empire is more powerful, pervasive, and cunning. If imperial Rome was able to claim devotion and demand sacrifice, the empire of our time ... has greater uncanny power to make idolatrous claims. This is even more so if we think that we not only live in a 'market economy,' we also live in a 'market society' or, broadly, the global domination system of which the market is one expression. Its more ubiquitous and beguiling presence gives validity to its claim: 'outside of the market there is no salvation.' Nations have claimed imperial status, but they all bow down and serve this god – an idol. Modern rulers themselves have passed draconian measures both to perpetuate themselves in power and in defense of this idol" (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 3; p. 376; "Theological Perspective").

It's why I find Jesus first question to his disciples so interesting today. "Who do people say that I am?" If he's trying to get after what we think he's trying to get after, it seems more effective to ask, what are people saying about me? Or, do people see me as a leader, do they like the way I teach" but not, "Who do people say that I am?"

And the disciples' answers are even more interesting; well, rumor has it you are Elijah or John. We might say, "You care for the sick like Mother Teresa," or "Your teaching reminds me of Gandhi." To say that someone sounds like or acts like someone we admire and has done great things for humanity is different

from answering, "Some say you are Elijah." Elijah raised the son of a widow from the dead (like Jesus did) and challenged the way people thought about and talked about God (like Jesus did) and was taken from the earth in a chariot ... and some people of the day thought that Jesus could have been Elijah returned from heaven. Perhaps they disbelieved reports of John's death and thought he lived on by another name or that he is a reincarnated version of John.

This is not just an ancient phenomenon however; think about reports that Elvis Presley is still alive. In recent years and with so many broad forms of communication and sources of information, people have been able to learn about and practice any of the world's spiritualities. Streams of reincarnation flow freely through speculations about eternal life and ways the soul of a loved one lives on after death, perhaps influencing circumstances in our lives. And there is great affinity for the concept of karma; it seems easier to catch than "Love your neighbor as yourself" or "'Vengeance is mine,' says the Lord." So I come to my second local theologian, Luther Seminary professor Lois Malcom who reads our society more than anything else, as a hazy/corrupted version Hinduism.

Who do people say that I am, exposes our many idolatries and false messiahs. Many scratch the surface of the world's spiritualities, not as many go in to life saving depths. So, then, inside and outside the church, the question, "Who do people say that I am," garners many interesting answers these days: one says, 'I think you're a really good guy.' Another says, you are a prophet or you are the Son of God. Still another says, a false prophet; or, I think you are the founder of a religion; or a charlatan, a con man, a mystic, a miracle worker ... this is not the question that will take us where we need to go but many question no further than this.

None the less, Jesus reframes the question. "Who do you say that I am?"

Clearly, Peter gave the text book answer and all we need do is copy his answer to get an A, and pass the quiz, a part of our scripted behavior from kindergarten on. But Jesus' evaluation system is different. He doesn't give out a grade, he gives a mission. If we get the answer right, we get the keys to living rightly and the calling to be an example to others.

So it's more than a quiz; as Fernandez says, it's a confession, or what we have in church history called a profession of faith – to profess, acknowledge, own Jesus as Savior means he becomes our occupation and vocation, our life's work.

Bruggemann, Fernandez, and Malcolm are saying that the culture and to an extent, church, have not gone to these depths and is hanging out at the level of rumors; that the rumor is: one thing is as good as another; rumor has it that: scratching the surface of the spiritual marketplace is life to you. Even more so, it is rumored that the marketplace itself is what meaningful life.

So, Jesus asks, you and I, "Who do you say that I am? The sometimes subtle and sometimes blatant ways that evil is intertwined with the good in the systems of our empire are exposed by answering this question. This is what Paul wants everyone to know; he understood the message of the life, death and resurrection of The Christ to be the life and work of a believer. (Holy cow, you guys, this should blow our minds!)

We Protestants can get all wound up about Matthew's version of this story because it's the basis for the Pope and the church of Rome, and have been more dismissive of Peter's calling and the gift of the keys to the kingdom as though it was a rumor; but what if the reality is, that Jesus, as he often did, used Peter as a stand in for each one of us who will gain the keys to kingdom living through the life of Jesus Christ, when we each live according to his script and you are a bringer of the kingdom!

Jesus preached peace not militarism; humility, not power; compassion not merit or worthiness; healing not trauma; freedom rather than systemic racism, sexism, or subjugation; and truth not post-truth. In Matthew's gospel Jesus' last teaching is that we must cloth the naked, feed the hungry, visit the prisoner, care for the refugee/those who've lost their homes as though each person in need is Jesus himself.

When we are young we think that the church is a building and then we grew up and said that the congregation is the church but at the core, Paul tells us each baptized believer is a church. Before the word 'church' was used, followers of Jesus were known simply as the ekklesia en christos/the community in Christ, or as Paul described it, the Body of Christ; the community or Body is called together as a movement – a movement led by the Holy Spirit within each individual in the community and every part of the body of Christ. The rumor is that we believe "if we are moral, then we will be loved by God; the reality is, "when we experience God's love, we will – almost naturally, be moral"; (Rohr, daily online meditation). The rumor is, spiritual life is meant to help us feel good; the reality is, it's not just for inner peace, seeking and living with greater inner peace is to serve in bringing world peace. The rumor is that we "are punished for our sins" but the reality is that we "are punished by our sins" because we live according a script. Together, God calls us together to be a counter script in the world.

The life/way of Jesus of Nazareth, is and always has been the counter script. And as Bruggemann says, "The entry point into the counter script is baptism." Much good has been done in his name however it is also true that his name has been and continues to be co-opted to serve the therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism of the dominant script which, if unchecked, will continue to divide us, perhaps destroy us, but certainly, never, ever set us free.

Here we know there is no product, treatment or process to counteract every ache and pain, or discomfort and trouble, and no life without inconvenience. We know there is One who will be with us and a community in Christ to support us. Here we know and let our lives publicly demonstrate that not everything can be fixed or made right through human ingenuity and that there are issues so complex we turn to wonder, prayer and discernment, as well as service, giving, and transformation. Here, we know the marketplace and all its trappings is an idolatry of lifestyle, possessions, and power. Our script is one of surrender and a letting go of the system and living into the kingdom of God. Jesus asks us, "Who do you say that I am" and this building answers with something of a rumor that Jesus came and deserves our worship – what he taught, why we worship becomes reality by the way we live. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[i] Walter Brueggemann's 19 Theses – The Christian Century, 2005.

1. Everybody has a script.
2. We are scripted by a process of nurture, formation and socialization that might go under the rubric of liturgy.
3. The dominant script of both selves and communities in our society, for both liberals and conservatives, is the script of therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism that permeates every dimension of our common life.
4. This script — enacted through advertising, propaganda and ideology, especially in the several liturgies of television — promises to make us safe and happy.
5. That script has failed.

6. Health depends, for society and for its members, on disengaging from and relinquishing the failed script.
7. It is the task of the church and its ministry to detach us from that powerful script.
8. The task of describing, relinquishment and disengagement is undertaken through the steady, patient, intentional articulation of an alternative script that we testify will indeed make us safe and joyous.
9. The alternative script is rooted in the Bible and enacted through the tradition of the church.
10. The defining factor of the alternative script is the God of the Bible, who, fleshed in Jesus, is variously Lord and Savior of Israel and Creator of heaven and Earth, and whom we name as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
11. The script of this God of power and life is not monolithic, one-dimensional or seamless, and we should not pretend that we have such an easy case to make in telling about this God.
12. The ragged, disjunctive quality of the counterscript to which we testify cannot be smoothed out.
13. The ragged, disputatious character of the counterscript to which we testify is so disputed and polyvalent that its adherents are always tempted to quarrel among themselves.
14. The entry point into the counterscript is baptism.
15. The nurture, formation and socialization into the counterscript with this elusive, irascible God at its center constitute the work of ministry.
16. Ministry is conducted in the awareness that most of us are deeply ambivalent about the alternative script.
17. The good news is that our ambivalence as we stand between scripts is precisely the primal venue for the work of God's Spirit.
18. Ministry and mission entail managing that in-escapable ambivalence that is the human predicament in faithful, generative ways.
19. The work of ministry is indispensable.