

## **“Heresay and You Say”**

**When God calls people into ministry, responses follow a predictable progression. If the one being called is of sound mind, he or she will say, "Not me! No way, no how!" The prophet Isaiah was an exception. He had an awesome vision in which God said, "Whom shall I send?" Without batting an eye Isaiah said, "Here I am, send me." In that spiritually intense, mystical moment, Isaiah wasn't thinking clearly. He should have had second thoughts, or should I say, second fears? Moses had a more typical response. God told him to tell Pharaoh in no uncertain terms, "Let my people go!" Moses said, "Who am I that he'll listen to me? I'm not eloquent. I can't even spell eloquent. I flunked high school speech." God replied, "It's not a problem. I'll teach you what to say." In a last attempt to wiggle out, poor Moses pleaded, "Oh, my Lord, I pray that you will send someone else.... please. I'll do anything else you ask, just don't ask me to speak in public."**

**The fear of public speaking tops the list of people's greatest fears. Few things are as threatening as speaking before an audience. You can recite the Gettysburg Address in front of your bedroom mirror with no problem, but do it in front of the class and the screen goes blank. You know the material forwards and backwards, but standing up front with no one backing you up except you makes even the strongest person come unglued.**

**For me, there is a fear worse than public speaking. It is public singing. Mrs. Swick was the music teacher at Taft Junior High. She was a sawed-off version of Sgt. Schultz on Hogan's Heroes. She never cracked a smile. She wore black lace-up shoes with boxy heels-the kind your grandmother wore. To develop the love of singing, she believed that every student should sing a solo in front of the class.**

I was a bundle of nerves when I preached my first sermon to my home congregation. There wasn't much meat on it, but the homefolks were merciful. I remember how scared I was when I preached the first time at the Manchester Church of the Brethren to a congregation peppered with college faculty and administrators. I remember how uptight I was when my sermons were critiqued by my homiletics professor and fellow seminarians. I learned that there is no congregation more critical than a bunch of student preachers. I certainly won't forget what it was like walking up to the pulpit at Annual Conference before 4,300 Brethren. But none of these experiences came close to the fright I had of singing before my 7th grade classmates.

There may have been some among us who could have gone on to be great singers, but the solo probably killed the desire. It did not inspire a love for singing in me. I sang that solo forty years ago, and it still gives me nightmares. The exercise served no useful purpose-with the possible exception of watching the class bully traumatized like a mouse at a starving cat convention.

A number of you have beautiful voices, and I marvel at you when you sing solos in worship. I've never admitted this, but when you sing, I have a flash of nervousness. It's not because I'm afraid you will have a miscue, although I hold my breath when singers go for the, "O night DIVINE" in "O Holy Night." It is leftover fright from Sgt. Swick's music class.

They were nearing a town called Caesarea Philippi when Jesus said to the disciples, "I'm curious. You've lounged around in coffee shops. You've stood in line at the grocery. What have you been hearing?" "About what?" they asked. "Who do people say that I am?" They said, "Well, Jesus, some say you're Joseph's son... sort of. Some think you're the reincarnation of John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah, or some long-overdue prophet. Does that answer your question?"

"Not quite," Jesus said. "Who do you say that I am?" Things got quiet. "Who do we say you are? Is that the question?" "Who do

**WE say that you are. Who do we SAY that you are. Who do we say that YOU are. That's a tough one, Jesus. Give us a minute to think." Jesus wasn't asking for a recitation of quotes. No reports. No theories. No speculation. No hearsay. "Who do YOU say that I am?"**

**Some questions are answered best when we say the first thing that comes to mind. When my son John was five, we were at the dinner table eating tuna casserole. Out of the blue he said, "Dad, I know what God looks like." "You do? I always wanted to know-- What does God look like?" Without looking up from his plate he said, "God looks like Jesus." No self-consciousness, no hesitancy, no embarrassment in his voice. He simply told the truth, as he understood it. God looks like Jesus... I could only marvel at his insight.**

**Sometimes the best answers aren't over analyzed. We open our mouths and there is it. In his typical impulsive style, Peter blurted out, "Who are you? Shoot, that's easy. You're the Christ, the Son of the living God." For once, Peter got it right the first time! "You're the one we've waited for. If we believe anything at all, we believe you're God's Son!"**

**Peter's answer wasn't based on meticulous observation. God had given insight to him, and Jesus blessed Peter, and handed him the keys to the Kingdom. He was a crusty fisherman, not a public speaker. Not long after, Jesus told Peter and company: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Samaria, and to the ends of the world." (Act 1: 8-9) He wasn't a preacher. He didn't go to seminary. But he found his voice. He wasn't self-conscious, hesitant, or embarrassed. After his first sermon, the church grew 3,000 in one day!**

**Ordinary people as fearful of speaking as you started talking up a storm. When the authorities told them to shut up, they said, "No disrespect intended, but we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."**

**Churches die for varieties of reasons, some which the church can't do anything about. But in many cases, death could have been prevented. If each church that passed away had a gravestone with an epitaph citing the cause of death, many would read: "We had a story to tell-died of lockjaw."**

**We have been entrusted with a story. We must ask ourselves- Who do we say Jesus is? It's not just an intellectual exercise of knowing information about him, or the things he said and did, and whether he had some good ideas that we could possibly use to make the world a little better place. Someone asked a Christian what she thought about Jesus. She said, "Jesus is not a THINK. Jesus is a FEEL." Along with the mind the heart and soul must get into the act. It isn't sufficient to only know what others have believed. Their insights and experiences are important, but only to the extent that they can help us clarify our own belief.**

**During the 297 years of our church's existence, several statements have been made about gambling. The gist of it is, we shouldn't. But while the biblical and moral reasoning behind the position are sound, the fact it we are betting all the time. All of us are betting our lives on something.**

**Tonight when you go to bed, you're betting on waking up in the morning. You get dressed and go to work betting that you'll have a job when you get there. Every day we bet with our hopes. Oral Roberts used to end his television program by saying, "Something good is going to happen to you!" If we had nothing to hope for we would never get out of bed. One reason that Rick Warren's book, *The Purpose Driven Life* is being read by so many people, is because they want to know their purpose in life. They are betting they have one.**

**You are here because you bet there is a God. You would rather bet God is than God isn't. You are gambling that if life has any meaning at all, and there is a better and best way to live, and then it has everything to do with Jesus. You would not have been willing to bet such high stakes if those around you who knew Jesus had not told you. You wouldn't bet on anything if**

**you hadn't seen for yourself the effect of Jesus' life on the lives and loves of others.**

**Jesus asks us, "Who do you say I am?" What was that? I didn't hear what you just said. You're going to have to speak up because I can't hear you. Why is that? Aren't you sure? Aren't you gamblers? Are you afraid of what others might think or say if you share the hope that is in you? Are you afraid of being branded as one of those intrusive, Bible thumping, narrow-minded, out-to-make-another-conversion people? Are you afraid of being inadequate or being asked questions you don't know how to answer?**

**We hear a lot about our increasingly "pluralistic society where there are so many choices, so many perspectives, so many versions of the truth, religions from A to Z and a laid-back attitude that says, "Just pick one... any one. It doesn't matter since all that matters is what truth is to you."**

**Frederick Buechner spent a semester as visiting lecturer at the Harvard Divinity School, which prided itself in its pluralistic approach to theology. Buechner had been speaking as candidly and personally as he knew how about his faith and how he had tried over the years to express it in language. He hoped to get the class to respond with personal sharing of their own faith, but most just sat there without saying a word. In frustration he told them they reminded him of a lot of dead fish lying on cracked ice in a fish store window with their round blank eyes. He said:**

***There I was, making a fool of myself spilling out to them the secrets of my heart, and there they were, not telling me what they believed about anything beneath the level of their various causes.***

**Then an African student said, "The reason I do not say anything about what I believe is that I'm afraid it will be shot down."**

**Buechner says, "The danger of pluralism is that it creates factions grinding their separate axes, and as a result, something precious is in danger of being drowned out and lost."**

**One of the sub-themes of the television show, The X-Files was, "The Truth is Out There." No it isn't. The truth isn't some vague cloud floating in the intellectual stratosphere. The truth isn't a secret that is only found by the people who are smart enough or spiritual enough to know where to look. It's within everyone who has invited Jesus into his or her lives. When we KNOW who Jesus is, we then TELL who he is with our words and our practice.**

**One of the old remedies to the fear of public speaking is to imagine that everyone in the audience is naked. I've got a better idea. Imagine that those to whom you speak to are receptive. We are living in dark times, but remarkable times as well. Throughout history, all of the great revivals inspired by the Holy Spirit have happened within the church. But today the Holy Spirit is creating a revival outside the church. Particularly among the young, there is a great disillusionment with the things our society says we should value.**

**They are spiritually hungry and receptive to a message they can base their lives upon. They believe in God, they just don't want to be a part of churches that portray God and his Son in such narrow and judgmental ways. They are more ready than you realize. They are waiting to hear an old, old story told in a new, good way. They want more than hearsay. They want to know what you say.**

**So... what do you say?**