



SPIRIT IN THE DESERT

Matthew 16:13-20

When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Grace and peace to you from the mystery in whom we live and move and have our being.

On page 25 of the *Big Book* for Alcoholics Anonymous it says:

“The great fact is just this, and nothing less: that we have had deep and profound spiritual experiences which have revolutionized our whole attitude toward life, toward our fellows and toward God's universe.”

In my 30-plus years of walking alongside drug addicts, alcoholics, anorexics, and disillusioned churchgoers, there is one thing I'm certain of: a belief in God will not save you.

Is it necessary to believe in first responders when you are being dragged from a fire you've caused?

Is it necessary for a baby to believe in the concept of mother for it to be brought into the world?

What's more important, that a mother believes in her baby, or that the baby believes in her? What's more important, that I believe in God, or that God believes in me?

Here's the scary part if it's true, that our relationship with God is based upon belief alone. In Mark 1:23-24 it says, “Just then, a man in their synagogue who was possessed by an impure spirit cried out, ‘What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are- the Holy One of God’”

Well, doesn't this demon sound a lot like modern-day Christians who believe in the God that is supported by a fear of where they may go if they don't believe?

They've been "saved," so a passion to save the world one conversation at a time, begins. Every engagement with a stranger or loved one hopefully ends in a prayer of belief. In the "believers" mind, if a person prays the prayer, they will no longer be destined for eternal punishment. Plus, they will receive the golden ticket for entrance into a kingdom that is not presently at hand.

Don't get me wrong. Any moment of clarity and willingness to surrender to the God who is greater than ourselves—any admission of powerlessness over something that is controlling us—can unlock the door to divine intimacy. It did for me!

To gaze into the beauty of that which loves you, captivates you, brings you to your knees with gratitude is experience, not belief.

I need not prove I had a father up until the time I was 4 years old. There is no profession that must be made that he indeed existed, that he loved me and that he once pulled me from the Encanto park lagoon at our church's family picnic.

I do not remember the picnic. I have zero recollection of the event. But I clearly remember falling in the lagoon and going under water. The mud sucking my little shoes beneath the surface. I remember the cold darkness.

Then I felt something grab my arm and I was suddenly being pulled from the mud and water to the surface. I remember staring into my dad's eyes and it was then I knew who saved me. I may not be able to prove I had a dad to anyone else, but I know I was saved.

For me, the question Jesus poses to the disciples is about the cultural rumors around town versus the disciples own experience.

The disciples had bonding experience after bonding experience with Jesus. They followed Jesus into his compassionate, welcoming love toward others in the most unlikely places. Every healing, every feast was an experience. They cooked together, slept together and had private conversations far away from the crowds. This is how they *experienced* Jesus.

One time, I came home from a personal appearance, and as usual, my kids ran to me and gave me big hugs. If I had asked my kids, "Hey, who do your friends say that I am?" they might have answered, "They say you're the Phoenix Suns Gorilla."

The public might have answered what I was known for, and many others would have repeated things they only heard or read about. But I never had to ask my children, "Who do you say that I am" because they didn't care how funny I was at the appearance. They didn't

wonder what I did. All that mattered to them was that dad was home, and I felt that belonging to my core.

It was one of the biggest moments of clarity that contributed to my eventual walking away from the image I portrayed. It was a metaphor for walking away from many other images myself and others created. It is a metaphor for many who have walked away from job, religion, love relationships and substance attachments.

As a performer others may have loved me for what I did, but it was not who I was. God loved me nakedly without my mask and I experienced that love from my children and still do.

How you experience the mystery we call God never needs to be proven or defended. Unfortunately, belief will always be at the center of debate in the town square because the human condition aims to be right rather than intimate.

As I have gotten older, the question that arises within me—and the question I ask others—is, “How does the mystery we call God reveal itself to you?” Or, “How do you experience the mystery we call God?”

It might be frustrating to some who believe that a verbal confession about the identity of Jesus is necessary to be rescued or “saved.” But I suspect that the way they experience God through sincere confession and practice is okay, too! If it brings them into an experience of intimacy with God—the Peter moment when he says, “You, Jesus, you are my rescuer,” then it is beautiful.

Jesus asked Peter who he thought Jesus was. Peter said, in essence, “You are the one who pulled me from the lagoon.” Jesus loved Peter’s response because it was personal. It was Peter’s experience, not a response to cultural rumors or religious dogma. It was intimately revealed by the Spirit. It was experienced.

And now I will close with a very peculiar final word given to the disciples as his conversation with them ended. Remember, Jesus had just praised Peter that his answer was not revealed by the words of Jesus or any rumor. It was revealed to him from heaven. The heaven we all have access to.

Here are his final words.

“Then sternly he ordered them to not tell anyone that he was the Messiah”

As I “amen” us away, I encourage you to resist the desire to make sense of Jesus’ instructions through assumptions, commentaries, or belief biases. Rather, sit with them and listen to the Spirit. To let go of belief is to open oneself to “deep and profound

experiences” that may just “revolutionize your whole attitude toward life, toward our fellows and toward God's universe.”

Amen