

Who's on First
Seventh Sunday of Easter/Ascension/Year B
John 17:6-18
Rev. Stephanie Bekhor
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Ah, Baseball: "take me out to the ball park; buy me some peanuts and cracker jacks; I don't care if I never get back!"

We love baseball, even those of us who don't care much for the game itself. We feel a tinge of excitement when we walk into a magnificent stadium and tap into the energy of the crowd. We pass our dollar bills down the row and eat and drink and cheer our team and boo the other team, whose players we don't even know.

Bud Abbott and Lou Costello have immortalized our fascination with baseball in their comedy sketch, "Who's on First":

"You know I've never met the guys [on the team]," says Costello, playing the part of peanut vender, Sebastian Dinwiddle. "You'll have to tell me their names."

"Well, on the bags," says Abbott, playing the team's manager, "Who's on first, What's on second, and I Don't Know is on third."

"That's what I want to find out," replies Costello.

"I said, Who's on first, What's on second, and I Don't Know's on third."

"Are you the manager?" Costello asks, confused. "Yes," Abbott replies.

"And you don't know the fellows' names?"

"Well I should."

"Well then who's on first?"

"Yes," says Abbott.

Frustrated, Costello continues: "I mean the fellow's name." "Who," Abbott answers him.

"The guy on first."

“Who.”

“The first baseman.”

“Who.”

“All I’m trying to find out,” yells Costello, “is *what's* the guy's name on first base,” to which Abbott corrects: “No. What is on second base.”

“I’m not asking you who's on second,” to which Abbott replies, “Who's on first.”

The peanut vendor gives up: “I don't know.” Abbott continues: “He's on third; we're not talking about him.”

The seventeenth chapter of the Gospel of John is similarly confusing; there are so many who's and what's and yours and mines that even those well-versed in the Bible might get lost.

“I have made your name known,” Jesus says (17:6a).

Whose name?

“Those whom you gave me from the world were yours and you gave them to me” (17:6b)

Who?

“Now they know that everything you have given me is from you; for what you gave to me I have given to them” (17:7-8a).

What?

“I am asking...on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours...and yours are mine” (17:9-10a).

Huh?

The Gospel of John has always been poetic; as such, it can get confusing. What if we break it down to Who, What and I-Don't-Know?

Who: God the Father, the source of all that is;

What: Jesus the Son, he whom the Father “sent into the world” (John 17:18a) to save the world (John 3:16).

I-Don't-Know: the Holy Spirit, whom John likens in chapter three to “the wind [that] blows where it chooses; you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit” (3:8).

Who's on first; What's on second; I-Don't-Know's on third.

As the Father sent the son into the world, Jesus, by the Holy Spirit, has sent his followers into the world. And so we are led by a Spirit we can't see into a world that often perplexes us: led by I-Don't-Know into I-Don't-Know.

Is it any wonder we, like Costello's Dinwiddle, are anxious?

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But if we're anxious, just imagine how John's Christian community felt. They didn't know Jesus directly either; he had been crucified before most of them were even born, and yet they were called in his name by a Spirit they couldn't see into a world that persecuted them.

Suzanne Collins examined the theme of persecution in her mega-hit book, *The Hunger Games*. When it was first published I went to the library to check it out but couldn't find it on the shelves.

“Excuse me,” I asked the woman at the information desk. “Do you have a copy of *The Hunger Games*?”

She looked at me as though I'd asked a dumb question: “We have *fifty* copies,” she replied.

“Fifty? Wow...”

“We can put you on the waiting list.”

“The waiting list?”

When I finally got my copy, I read it in nearly one sitting; the tale is gruesome, and like so many gruesome tales, transfixing. The story's set in the future in a land called Panem, which is made up of a corrupt Capitol and twelve out-lying districts, most of which are poor and hungry. Because of an uprising by the districts against the Capitol seventy-five-years earlier, the Capitol instituted “The Hunger Games” to punish the districts. Each year, the names of one teenaged-girl and one teenaged-boy from each district are drawn, and the “lucky winners” are “invited” to the Capitol to fight-to-the-death against each other; only one “contestant” can survive.

This setting is similar to that of John's early Christian community; they, too, were persecuted by a ruthless empire that used them for entertainment and sport, calling them into arenas to fight-to-the-death against mighty warriors and ferocious animals. It would've been like our modern-day Survivor, only the players are *permanently* eliminated.

To say that John's community was disheartened was an understatement; they were on the verge of giving up. John's gospel was intended to comfort, encourage and motivate his downtrodden community and, though it wasn't his intention, to encourage any on the edge. Listen to his words in the latter half of today's gospel passage:

"I am no longer in the world," says Jesus, "but [my followers] are in the world...Holy Father, protect them....While I was with them, I protected them...I guarded them, and not one of them was lost....But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves" (17:11-13)

This is a love letter. Don't give up; you may be persecuted in this world, but you don't belong to this world; you belong to the kingdom of God.

"The world has hated them," Jesus continues, "because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world" (17:14).

But perhaps the most difficult pill to swallow is not the reality of persecution and of its corollary, anxiety, but the knowledge that we aren't lifted from it, at least not immediately:

"I am not asking you to take them out of the world," Jesus says to the Father.

Why not, Jesus? If God is Who and you're What, then why leave us in the I-Don't-know? Take us with you, please.

"But I ask you to protect them from the evil one," Jesus continues: "Sanctify them in the truth....As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." (17:15b, 17-18).

We are meant to live out God's truth as made known to us through our scriptures and the Spirit: to live transparently, admiring our need for spiritual and physical healing and proclaiming that healing is possible through specific acts of love, repentance, justice and mercy.

How might Jesus be sending us into the world today? wherever pain, violence and brokenness exist there is an opportunity For Christ to shine through; we are angry and sad, and so is Jesus. The difference? We tend to lash out; Jesus, though no less angry or sad, responds with compassion: "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do." I wonder: how would Jesus have responded to Freddie Gray's assailants, the ones who were charged with protecting him? How would he respond to the perpetrators and victims of the Baltimore riots?

Jesus sending us into a tortured world is not sadistic; on the contrary: it is born of God's love and desire that all might be saved.

And so we followers of Jesus, ourselves battered and bruised, are sent into the world, led by a Spirit we don't always know, to share God's word with a world that often breaks our hearts.

How do we share Jesus reconciling love when we are tired and fed up? How do we root, root, root for not only the home team, but also for the away team, those we boo out of the stadium?

It is a difficult truth that, in God's game, God's on every base—Who, What, and I-Don't-Know—rooting *everyone* home.

Amen.