

I've Been Meaning to Ask: "Where Are You From?"

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July 31, 2022

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Genesis 2:4b-15

John 1:35-51

They call it "The Hummus Wars." This is how a report from about 15 years back on NPR began. Gladly, in this case, there is no actual war, although the people in the article belong to countries and cultures that have been involved with years of conflict. But the weapons of this war are literally food. You see, in Lebanon, in 2009, the Minister of Tourism tried to make a global point that hummus-- that humble spread made of chickpeas, olive oil, tahini, lemon juice, and garlic-- belongs to Lebanon. And this was in reaction to a growing trend to see hummus as an Israeli dish. In Lebanon, there was a movement to register the word "hummus" with the European Union so it would be protected, and only chickpea paste coming from Lebanon could be called "hummus"-- much like Champagne can only come from a specific region of France; all other sparkling wines are Prosecco, or Cava, or just sparkling wine. So, in a highly publicized event, Lebanese hummus makers came together and produced a 4,532 plate of hummus, to show the world just who and where can take credit for hummus in all its creamy awesomeness.

In response to Lebanon's efforts to claim hummus, an Arab-Israeli restaurant owner in an Arab village just outside Jerusalem made an even bigger vat of of hummus, this time using a satellite dish to hold 4 tons of the creamy paste. And folks spoke up in Egypt, and in Palestine, and throughout the Arab world to say that hummus belongs to Middle Eastern culture, and to no one particular culture. And as far as Israel goes, which was settled by the Jewish diaspora mostly coming from Europe following WWII, at first those early Israeli settlers ate the food of their European countries of origin; but over the decades, hummus has been a central part of Israeli food, too.

Hummus, in Arabic, means "chickpeas." Another word, *humus*, from Latin, means "earth" or "ground." In gardening, the humus is the richest part of the soil. It's the word from which we get the name *human*, for-- as Genesis teaches-- God formed human from the dust of the earth. At funerals, as happened yesterday at Steve Borer's memorial service, we are reminded that we are made from dust, and to dust we shall return. From *humus* we get the word humility.

It is quite the same in Hebrew, and if you look at the original text, you see that God formed the human-- '*adam*-- from the dust of the ground-- *adamah*. Then, God breathed into the human's nostrils, and made '*Adam* a living creature, *nephesh hayah*-- the same phrase that describes aquatic life, land animals, birds, all flesh-- *nephesh hayah*.

We are, each and every one of us, part of the living creation touched by the breath of God-- the same breath that gives life to the fish, and the birds, and the mutt who is waiting by my front

door anticipating the moment I come home. As humans, we are all formed of the dust of the earth— maybe not literally fashioned out of dirt, but at an atomic level, made of the same stardust that makes up the universe. This truth should both humble us, and inspire us to awe and wonder at how we are all connected through the same materials God gave for life.

How many of you have been asked, around here, “Where are you from?” If Adam were to answer such a question, maybe he would have said, “that dirt pile in the garden.” I know I receive that question, “Where are you from?” a little differently than how I have heard my friends and family who come from immigrant families hear that question; while people may rightly guess my accent is not of New Jersey, I never wonder if the asker is questioning my belonging to the country of my birth, or place me within a hierarchy of cultural groups; however, some may read beneath this question assumptions, judgments, or even micro-aggressions. But I also know my comfort is a sign of my privilege.

I have shared before that while our coffee hour presents a great time to get to know people, it is also an introvert’s nightmare. Those first questions that try to pin a person down: where they are from, where they work, who they know... they can feel invasive to some, and they can even touch upon something that feels very sensitive to the person being asked. I know someone who was struggling with chronic unemployment who stopped coming to church for two years, because— she said— one of the first things people asked her when they met is, “Where do you work?” To their defense, I am sure they only wanted to get to know the person and find points of connection to her. But to her, the question felt like her work determined her worth.

Our worth comes from the basic assumption that God chose to scoop up mud, fashion a body, press holy lips to human ones, and in a sacred kiss, cause the breath of life to enter it. Where we come from, who we love, where we work— none of that adds or subtracts to our basic, sacred worth in God’s eyes.

But that doesn’t mean we can’t find other interesting things about one another. And as we slog through another year in pandemic times, when we don’t always stick around to talk to one another, and we aren’t even sure who is worshiping with us online, we miss those points of connection where we can come to know one another at a more intimate level. Yesterday evening, when Vicky texted me to suggest that we let people know that there will be lunch food yesterday, thanks to the leftovers from the beautiful and plentiful reception the Deacons prepared for Steve Borer’s funeral, I was delighted. We need a reason to stick around and talk to one another, and if croissant sandwiches and lemon cakes makes that easier, then I am all for it.

But I wonder, what kinds of questions are good to ask, to move people from that level of being strangers, to being friends? I like to ask visitors who come to the church, “What brought you here today?” Sometimes they answer with something as simple as, “I see the church sign and I have been meaning to go.” We get a lot of that. But we also see those who will answer that question with a deeper revelation: *“I lost someone I love, and I am wondering where God is.”* *“My family church has told me that I am sinful because I am gay. I see on your website that*

*your church tells a different story, and that's a story I want to hear.*" "I had stopped going to church in my adulthood. But after having a child, I realized how much I want my family to know who God is; I'd like to know that again myself." I challenge you to think of some questions that are good to ask people, new to this church and those who have been around for years, that can offer a chance for people to reveal something of who they are, questions which allow them— if they are willing— to share something that truly matters to them. And that might be where they are from, where they work, or who they love. But if you can ask it in a way that invites those things to bubble up, rather than defining the criteria for worth, it can be a different kind of conversation. For those with whom you have an already established relationship, there are other questions that signal that you have the time to really listen, rather than asking, "how's it going?"

When Jesus got pointed out by John the baptizer as the Lamb of God, a couple of John's disciples followed Jesus. The Greek word in the text implies they shifted their discipleship from John, to Jesus— not simply that they chased after him at that moment. Jesus asked them a similar kind of question to "What brought you here today?" He said, "What are you looking for?" What an interesting question to ask, that points to a deeper connection than simply asking where someone is from. They said back to him, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" Maybe they wanted to know what connections he had in town, or how costly his quarters may be. And I am not sure whether the title of Rabbi is an upgrade or downgrade from *Lamb of God*; I guess that depends on how you feel about sacrifice. Regardless, instead of answering their question, Jesus simply says something that brings them into deeper relationship: "Come and see." And so, they spent the day with Jesus. After remaining with Jesus for the day, Andrew announced to his brother Simon Peter, who would also become a disciple, "We have found the *Messiah*."

There is something in that time that moved these disciples from a casual or even prying curiosity, to an invested understanding of the work and mission of Jesus. Similarly, the next day, Philip— who was from Bethsaida, the same city as Andrew and Simon Peter, told Nathaniel, "We have found him about whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathaniel's response seemed to drip with cynicism and judgment: "*Can anything good come out of Nazareth?*"

But before Nathaniel had even approached Jesus, Jesus had *seen* Nathaniel— sitting under the shadow of the fig tree. He said out loud to Nathaniel, "Here is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit"— in other words, to counter the rough edges Nathaniel threw at him, even dismissing Jesus' hometown, Jesus disarms Nathaniel by showing Nathaniel that Jesus sees him. Nathaniel is only mentioned a couple of times in the Bible, unlike the rest of the disciples, who show up in numerous stories. But Jesus saw him, and drew out something beneath that gruffness, something good, and perhaps useful for discipleship. "Where did you get to know me?" Nathaniel asked.

That story leaves me stunned, to be honest. I have to confess, I am guilty of writing off people who say stupid stuff. When I sense that someone is racist, or if they are rude to me, I figure they aren't worth my time. I dismiss them, or at least try to if I can let go of my anger enough to

do so. I have even missed family gatherings due to these reasons. But Jesus did not stop there. He had faith that there was more to Nathaniel than his callous remark showed. In Nathaniel, there was dirt that could be worked with, and fashioned into something that has an important role in God's good creation.

We may not fight over hummus here; instead our arguments about food are whether a footlong sandwich is called a hoagie, a grinder, or a sub. There is a lot that is much more important, worth fighting about right now: whether the hungry of our community will be fed, care of the environment; reproductive healthcare; I could keep going. But even as we stand up for what we believe is right, let us not forget that we are just dust, infused with holy breath, and that we are tied to a vast creation, and even tied to those whom we may oppose, who are also made of dust and holy breath. We are from the same place.

I've been meaning to ask. How would you like to be known? Come with Jesus. For with him, you will truly see, and you will be seen.