

Sermon for Sunday, February 26, 2017

IDENTITY

The common lectionary is a three-year cycle of readings, and we are currently in cycle A. The advantage of the lectionary is that it allows us, and compels us, to consider the whole of the biblical witness, and not just our favorite or preferred parts. But there are certain episodes in the life of Jesus that come up every year no matter what, like his birth, his crucifixion, his resurrection, and his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, to name a few. Jesus transfiguration is another of those, and the preacher's task, my task, each year, is to say something fresh, new, and enlightening about it. I disclose this because I enter into this text thinking to myself, "Good grief! What else do I have to say about the transfiguration of Jesus that I have not said before?" It turns out, something very, very important. Go figure.

The problem in this text is the word "transfiguration." It implies that Jesus changed, that he morphed into someone else, that suddenly before he set his face toward Jerusalem and the cross that awaited him there, he was infused with God's power in a way that he didn't have it before, and with Moses and Elijah present, representing the law and the prophets, Jesus becomes the fulfillment of both. Cinematically it reminds me of the Lord of the Rings, when Gandalf the Grey is transformed—we know not how—into Gandalf the White, infused with more power and insight, and stature. But in my reading of this text this year, I realized it is not really about transformation, or transfiguration, or transfiguration at all. It's just revelation. Jesus is revealed in the sight of Peter, James, and John as the son of God, not just as the Messiah whom Peter recognized him to be, a conceptual figure burdened with all kinds of political and revolutionary expectations in ancient Israel, but as the son of the Most High, God's Beloved, God with us. This remarkable episode is about Jesus' true identity being revealed to his closest followers, to the three men who would form and lead the post-resurrection church.

It's important for us to remember that the disciples weren't present at Jesus' baptism. They did not hear the voice from heaven declaring Jesus as God's beloved son with whom God was well pleased. Jesus' true identity was hidden from them, and we know they had a hard time figuring it out. I mean, we are already more than half way through Matthew's Gospel. But on this mountain, Jesus' true identity is revealed, and Peter, James, and John hear the voice of God repeating what Jesus heard at his baptism: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased." They were given an exclusive vision of Jesus' identity. He wasn't so much changed or transfigured, but rather it was as if his earthly nature became transparent and his divine nature shown through.

Wouldn't it be nice, if from time to time at least, our earthly nature became transparent and our divine nature shown through, that people could see that we are baptized, adopted into God's family, and beloved children of God with whom God is well pleased? Wouldn't it be nice if from time to time it was revealed that we are robed in Christ, aglow with his love, forgiveness, mercy, faith, and confidence in God?

Who are you, really? What is your identity? Who do people see you to be, and is that really who you are, or who you want to be?

Most of us will recognize these questions as belonging to our adolescence, when we were embracing an identity that was separate, yet connected, to our parents. Adolescence is a time of introspection and experimentation, of sorting out who we really are, and who we want to be, and who we want to be known to be.

I remember feeling fortunate that during my adolescence I moved to a new community. I was no longer burdened with an "earthly nature" established in my old community, but could begin to allow my "true nature" to shine through, whatever that true nature was. And isn't that how we do it? Identity is not about inventing ourselves; it's about discovering ourselves. It's not about becoming less authentic, but about becoming more authentic. It's about becoming inwardly and outwardly—through fits and starts and failures and successes—who we really are. It's about revealing our heart and spirit and passion to the world. And though these questions begin in earnest in adolescence, we also know that the effort to live as our authentic selves is a life-long endeavor, and a challenging one.

Martin Luther, whenever he was distressed or afraid, would repeat aloud to himself over and over again, "I am baptized! I am baptized!" It was an identity he embraced as God's miraculous gift to him, and in which he found confidence, and courage.

Most of us were baptized as infants, and have no memory of receiving that miraculous gift. But in adolescence, we were invited by the church to confirm the baptismal vows made on our behalf by our parents. In two weeks, nineteen young people will do just that in this sanctuary, and they are meeting with the Session next Sunday to be accepted into the membership of Ladue Chapel. But I want us to rethink that a bit, because vows made by our parents, and vows made by the church, and vows made by God do not need to be confirmed in any way, shape, or form. They are promises that we made, and promises that are ours to keep. No, what needs to be confirmed by each one of us, and by the youth joining our church next week, is our identity as children of God, as persons chosen by God, beloved of God, embraced by God, called by God, adopted by God into God's family of faith, and belonging to God. It's not about vows; it's about identity. Who are you? Whose are you? How will you be known? How will you reveal to the world your divine self, that self made in the image of God?

When Jesus true identity was revealed to Peter, James, and John, in the vision on the mountain, and after that brief glimpse into his glory went away, Jesus warned them to tell no one of the vision until after the resurrection of the Son of Man. Why? Because our Lord's identity, and glory, is not fully revealed, without acknowledging and embracing as essential to who Jesus is, his suffering, death, and resurrection. He is not just Jesus of Nazareth, or the Messiah; he is the Savior. On Wednesday of this week, we enter into that part of Jesus' life and identity again, as we begin the powerful and poignant journey through the season of Lent, following Jesus to the cross and beyond, and reminding ourselves again that our identity is in being dust, that to dust will return, but dust that is beloved of God.

Who are you? Whose are you? How will you be known? How will you reveal to the world your divine self, that self made in the image of God?

It was Monday morning. A man living in New York was headed to work and running a bit late. He couldn't afford to miss his subway train. But as he waited he thought about the pastor's sermon he had heard the day before in church. The pastor challenged each of them to find some way in the week ahead to demonstrate their faith. What could he do though? He went to work early and returned home late. He wasn't about to talk to any of his co-workers about what he believed. They would surely ostracize him as a religious fanatic, which he wasn't.

Just then, as the platform was filling up with commuters, a little boy dropped his jar full of marbles. The jar didn't break, but the marbles went everywhere, and the little boy, quickly recognizing the hopelessness of the situation, began to cry, while nonetheless trying to capture as many marbles as he could. The train was just coming into the station, but the man knew what he had to do. He put down his briefcase and in his nice suit started helping the boy fetch the far-flung marbles. The boy glanced at him with puzzlement. When the train began to pull away, the man looked at it for a moment, so did the boy, and then went back to picking up the marbles, made easier now with all the commuters out of the way. Finally, the last marble recovered, he came close to the boy and dropped it into his jar. With a faint smile he said, "There, I think we got them all." The boy looked up at him and asked, "Are you Jesus?"

Who are you? Whose are you? How will you be known? How will you reveal to the world your divine self, that self made in the image of God? What is your identity? Wouldn't it be nice, if from time to time at least, our earthly nature became transparent and our divine nature shown through, that people could see that we are baptized, adopted into God's family, and beloved children of God with whom God is well pleased? Wouldn't it be nice if from time to time it was revealed that we are robed in Christ, aglow with his love, forgiveness, mercy, faith and confidence in God?

PRAYER: Most loving God, through faith in Jesus Christ we know that we too are your beloved children with whom you are well pleased. Help us to claim that identity each and every day, and by the power of your Holy Spirit working in us, to reveal your divine nature in our thoughts, words, and actions. In Christ we pray. Amen.

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Matthew 17:1-9