

BECOMING THE BELOVED

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February 25, 2018

Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. Mark 8:31-35

This past weekend, this community of faith hosted an epic weekend long exploration of systemic racism. This lens focuses not so much on individual behaviors and *those people over there in pointy white hats*, but rather the distortions and deforming patterns that arise from the ideology of white supremacy; racism is racial prejudice plus the misuse of power by systems and institutions. It is baked into our history, our laws, our practices of law enforcement, our economy, our culture, and the church. The church at large, and this one right here. It is the sea we all swim in, which makes it so hard to see. So the first task of dismantling or disrupting those patterns is awareness. What is the larger context? How did we get here? Where are we in it? Who are we really? And who do we want to become?

I can't help but connect this invitation to grapple with our history and culture with the whole transition wilderness that we've been moving through for about year now. The whole question of identity is also central to the pastor search process—I mean, how can we call a new leader if we haven't reflected deeply about who we are, where we've been, and where we sense we are being led. And to be clear: these are questions that have been brewing, our call has been growing, our identity has been evolving for quite a long time, say 275 years or so.

After all, these are really the essential questions of spiritual life. John Calvin, our spiritual ancestor, writing some 500 years ago, begins his entire theological masterwork with these two claims: "Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God... without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self." Francis of Assisi, a less often claimed but no less influential figure in our spiritual heritage (some 300 years before that) reportedly spent hours at prayer simply repeating these words: Who are You? And who am I?

Questions about identity are simmering under the surface of our reading today. Just before today's story, Jesus has asked the disciples "who do you say that I am?" To which Peter responds: "You are the Christ!" in Hebrew, Messiah, this kingly figure of Hebrew expectation, who would ride in on the big white horse, smite the enemy, and save us all from oppression. Jesus shuts that down, and then invokes this mysterious "son of man" image, another recurring figure of the Hebrew scriptures. Christians often conflate this with the title "son of God." But in Hebrew tradition, "son of man" has a very particular context. The phrase actually could be more faithfully translated as

simply “the human one” or just “human being” at least according to theologian Walter Wink, in his masterful book *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man*. Wink concludes that “son of man” is not a divine title at all, but a concept or an identity. Jesus, in identifying with the “Human One” of his tradition is embracing the call to become a fully realized human being, in true communion with the One and true community with all.

In last week’s baptism story we learned that, according to Mark, Jesus’ whole ministry begins with this divine voice proclaiming him Beloved. **That** is the deepest identity of “the human one.” “Being the beloved” writes Henri Nouwen in *Life of the Beloved*, “expresses the core truth of our existence.” And claiming the deep truth of being the Beloved immediately faces us with the task of *becoming who we already are*. And becoming the Beloved, Nouwen suggests, is all about taking up our lives right as they are, blessing them, breaking them open and sharing them with the world. It is a eucharistic pattern that guides every spiritual journey, including the communal journey we are on together.

Remember, too, that immediately after the Spirit declares Jesus Beloved, she drives him into the wilderness. None of this is about comfort or security. As Jesus tells the crowd: “those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” This journey from self-centered to Other-centered requires our willingness to die to anything that separates us from God.

So exploration of identity is the task at hand, in our spiritual lives, in our transition and in this work of becoming a truly anti racist, multicultural institution. We’ve actually been on that journey for a very long time, and what we learned this weekend is that this work of becoming is ongoing, and there are powerful forces working against it, and we may not be quite as far along as we would like to think.

I found it all both overwhelming and profoundly hopeful. Our trainer Jessica kept assuring us, its clear that you all have come a long way, therefore you know a lot about what needs to be done next. In particular, we’ve been seeking to become more fully More Light, and living into that identity for 20 years now. It has been a long, hard transformative journey, requiring endless study, conversation and prayer. It has been grounded in vulnerability, patience and compassion toward ourselves and one another, along with deep trust that the Spirit was leading the way. All of that is what we need to keep going, as our identity continues to evolve as not just explicitly anti-heterosexist, but also explicitly and openly anti racist. Our work of choosing welcome never ends.

Some specific strategies for change we explored this weekend included: preach, teach and confess the reality of and our complicity in systems of white supremacy, not just once, not just when tragedy strikes, not just during black history month, but as a practice. Cultivate a capacity for truth telling **and** the discomfort it brings. Keep having hard conversations, caring for one another, and interrogating: our mission, our vision, our values, our mythology, our culture and our history.

So lets start there. What do we know about the roots of this beloved community? We know that sometime in the early 18th century, a small band of outliers began to gather for worship, somewhere around Pack Horse Ford (the *wrong* side of the tracks; I know, I live there now!) Our official 1743 founding date was assigned to us, and seems to be

connected with records about a first presbytery-provided supply pastor. (Those of you chafing under our Presbyterian rules, just know that this frustrating system—which I like to say is the worst there is except for all the others--has been around *and kept us going* for a long time.) We know that in 1780, the land we occupy here was deeded to “Presbyterian Trustees” by the founders of Shepherdstown, where a log structure was built, destroyed by fire, and then rebuilt in 1836. I find no mention in our histories of who that land might have been taken from originally, or what kind of labor fired the bricks and spread the mortar to construct this building: what role, if any, did slave labor play? These are things we might want to know.

Our membership rolls show that there were black members going way back; but we also might acknowledge more openly that the west entrance and balcony stairs just off the entranceway were constructed *for their use*, to ensure segregation by skin color. Racism is reflected in our architecture. We also might want to confess that by around 1850 we had booted out the last person of color, and achieved full segregation. In a story that we’ve heard many times, we know that in September of 1862 in the wake of the horrific Battle of Antietam that this house of prayer became a hospital; the pews were torn out to make space for thousands of wounded and dying soldiers. We might want to add, though, that these were confederate soldiers. It might also be important for us to remember that in 1867, SPC followed the Winchester Presbytery as it broke away from the national body and joined the other confederate presbyteries to form the southern Presbyterian church. Reunification did not come until 1983.

Truth telling and confession may be painful and unpopular but they are essential for authentic liberation, necessary for us as we seek to become who God has created us to be. Following Jesus, we become the beloved as we become more fully human, more fully free. And Jesus is clear, this is not an easy path; “the human one” he teaches, will suffer, be rejected and killed. And also rise again. Love is stronger than death. The Beloved rises again and again.

And, of course, racism is not all there is to our history. Our former pastor led this congregation in interracial efforts in Shepherdstown for most of his 42 years. And years before that, in the early 60s, according to a black friend of mine, SPC had another firebrand pastor who she remembers organizing integrated bus trips to take Shepherd students to protest in Washington. And that’s not even to mention these last couple of years of intense race focused education efforts. This community has been on this journey of *becoming* for a very long time. Its just that there’s more to be done if we really want to inhabit a new transformed identity. If we really do desire to be disrupters of the systems of white supremacy that continue to deform us all, that today threaten the very fabric of our national life and future of our democracy. Our world has never been more desperate for clear, prophetic moral voices and truth tellers, willing to do the hard work necessary to offer an alternative vision for human flourishing.

Who are we in all of that? Who is God? As Francis reminds us, this is less a question than a prayer. And I don’t know about you, but I find it exhilarating to be able to ask, to pray, study, confess, lament, protest and rejoice in a community such as this dedicated to following Jesus, to becoming more fully human, to becoming the Beloved together. May this be so.