

Sermon: Who tells you who you are?
Last Sunday of Epiphany, Year A
Matthew 17:1-9

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“This is my Son, my Beloved.”

We hear a lot of echoes in today’s lectionary. In our first reading from Exodus, the Lord speaks to Moses from the cloud covered top of Mount Sinai. No doubt the writer of our Gospel reading, Matthew, was mindful of this story as he shared another mountain top story with us – this time with Jesus, Peter, James and John. Jesus leads this trio up a high mountain where they are overcome by a brilliant light and Jesus is transfigured before them. And in this mystical experience, Moses and Elijah show up as well. And while Peter is chatting them up because of his nervousness, suddenly a bright cloud overshadows them and the disciples hear a voice from the cloud, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased.”

God tells the trio and the rest of us who Jesus is - names him as his *son*, names him as *Beloved*, names him as one with whom God is well pleased. We hear an echo from Exodus to the Gospel reading, from mountain to mountain; and we can also hear an echo between our Gospel account of the Transfiguration and the Epistle of Peter reading where Peter or one of his students echoes again : This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. So *God tells us who Jesus is*.

Who tells you who you are? Perhaps you came from parents who told you right from the start that you were beloved. They fed you well, they nurtured you, they were able to afford to send you off to a good school, encouraged you every step of the way. Maybe your Sunday School teacher shared with you that you were loved by God at an early age and that stuck with you. Explicitly and implicitly, I hope you were told you were good, that you were valued, that you mattered, that you could become who you were meant to be.

My friend and yours, Edward Scott, Mary Baldwin professor and Allen Chapel A.M.E. pastor, told me a story a while back. He had a colleague/friend, named Irene, from Benin, Africa who moved to Atlanta to work on her PhD. in Comparative Literature. She taught French. When Irene moved here, her daughter was very young and yet she spoke five languages: Faun, Fulani, French and English and one other I can’t recall. Her mother’s task was to keep her from scrambling them together. The child was exceedingly bright.

The day came when it was time for her to begin school. On the first day of school the child came home in tears. Her mother asked her why she was crying and little Senemy said, “Why are we black? Why are we ugly?” She’d never heard this before in her native country of Benin. All she’d ever known were other black people. Racism suffocated her. The mother was deeply distraught and wondered if she should return to Africa as a way to rescue her daughter from psychological damage. She called Edward – “What should I do?” Edward said he almost told his friend to take her back. But then he told her, “I don’t know of any one black person in America who’s (not gone to school and) not had this experience. *Every single one of us* has had this experience, being called _____ (the word I can’t say and don’t want to say). You just grow up with it and develop a second layer of skin. Find ways to cope and hold on to your sense of humanity – which can best be found in the love of your parents. Your love that you have for your

daughter is the most POWERful thing in the world.” He went on to share his own experience - that his parents’ constant affirmation to him and his siblings meant everything– that message “you can be all that you’re intended to be” – spoken and not spoken. We knew we were special – they just treated us that way. The implicit message was just as powerful as explicit, maybe even more so. Edward encouraged his friend to be the powerful voice who would tell her daughter who she was – someone who was cherished and beautiful and intelligent, a *beloved daughter*.

Who tells you who you are? There are nefarious voices in this world that are full of hate and darkness, voices infused with envy or insecurity or fear, voices that spew racism or sexism, arrogance and belittlement. Voices that are quick to bully, quick to insult, quick to injure. If you watched the news this week, even one short segment, you heard it. I don’t have to name names. The hatred can be ignited by fear, loss of power, a lack of understanding, sometimes by pain or willful ignorance. And one very scary thing to consider is that sometimes that dark voice is our own.

Who tells you who you are? Is it your parents or siblings, your friends or peers, the media or advertisers? For better or for worse, there are all kinds of voices in the world telling us who we are. Christ’s identity is manifest and affirmed in the Transfiguration. This story helps us know who Jesus is. As followers of Jesus, as lovers of Christ, his identity helps us understand our own identity as Beloved, children of God. God tells us who we are.

Who we think we are is reflected in our behavior. If we believe that we and others are beloved children of God, we will treat ourselves and others with the dignity and respect they are due. We will be part of a Beloved Community.

In many ways our world is in crisis and we don’t seem to know what to do. But there is much we can do. We can take a deep look within and meditate on our own belovedness. We can look around us, notice whom is being told they are something less than beautiful, something less than valued, someone less than beloved. Notice those who are the objects of hatred or disrespect, the Senemy’s of the world, and take steps to lift them up. We can align our voices with God’s voice that tells us who we all are. You are my Beloved child; in you I am well pleased.

I’d like to close with a prayer from Richard Rohr:

Prayer for Our Community:

O Great Love, thank you for living and loving in us and through us. May all that we do flow from our deep connection with you and all beings. Help us become a community that vulnerably shares each other’s burdens and the weight of glory. Listen to our hearts’ longings for the healing of our world.. Knowing you are hearing us better than we are speaking, we offer these prayers in all the holy names of God, amen.