

REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE

Delivered by Moderator James Parks, February 21, 2016

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church, Baltimore, MD.

Luke 9:28-43, 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2

In the movie “The Lion King,” Simba, the young lion, runs away after his father, the Lion King, dies. Simba runs both from his past, thinking he is responsible for his father’s death, and also from his future as the next Lion King. At some point Simba looks into a deep pool of water and sees his own reflection. When he looks again, Simba’s reflection becomes that of his father. His father’s image then appears to Simba in the sky, and we hear the unmistakable voice of James Earl Jones saying; ‘Remember who you are!’”

As we transition from the celebration of the season of the Epiphany to the beginning of Lent, today’s text reminds us to take stock of who we are and what it means.

As was his custom, Jesus goes up to a mountaintop one evening to meet God. That, of course, is the purpose of prayer. This time he takes three of his disciples with him.

While he is praying, Jesus is visibly transformed. The appearance of Jesus’ face changes--that’s the word Luke uses—and his clothes turn dazzling white. He is joined by Moses and Elijah, the great law giver and the great prophet.

Luke’s gospel tells us that the three discuss Jesus’ imminent "departure" at Jerusalem. Now some translations use the phrase "passing" or his "departure." When I was in seminary, my professor pointed out that the Greek word Luke used was the same as the word to describe the Exodus from Egypt. That changes the whole dynamic of the story. This journey to Jerusalem and the events that will transpire there are not about death so much as life. The Easter story isn’t about the imprisonment and execution of one man as much as it is about the liberation and redemption of God’s creation, including humanity. The Exodus of the people of

God from captivity into freedom and fullness of life, which Moses and Elijah began, is finally being fulfilled in Jesus. Israel's covenant to be the people of God on earth was coming full circle with Jesus.

The disciples, as they often did, had no clue about what was happening. Peter sees the three together and he naturally wanted to hold on to the moment by institutionalizing it. But before Peter could destroy the power of the situation—you can't control and contain the mystical voice of God—the same voice that spoke at Jesus' baptism says "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him." Then Jesus stood alone as the one the disciples should listen to. The disciples did not understand that they had been witness to the power of God and how God was using Jesus as the instrument to rescue all of Creation.

This was God's way of telling Jesus, the disciples and Israel to "remember who you are."

While what happened on the mountaintop is important, I think what happened after is just as significant. In the morning Jesus comes down from the heavenly glory on the mountain and he is hit with earthly reality. In Mark's account of the events after the transfiguration, the disciples and the scribes are arguing over how to heal a boy who suffers from seizures and convulsions. The disciples, whom Jesus had just days ago given authority to drive out demons, tried, but couldn't do anything for the boy.

Desperate, the boy's father takes his child to Jesus. He had to act because while the politicians, academics and so-called experts—oops, I'm sorry--while the disciples and Pharisees are arguing over who gets credit, over process, over technique, the boy is still suffering. Sometimes those of us who sit in comfortable houses and offices pontificating on the best ways to help the poor and the marginalized forget that in the real world people are hurting. Children are starving and sick folks are dying for lack of adequate health care while we talk an issue to death.

After Jesus heals the boy, according to Mark, the disciples ask why they couldn't heal him. Jesus tells them that their failure wasn't because of a lack of effort. Their failure wasn't because of technique. It wasn't because of the advice they received. Their failure was because they didn't believe that they needed God's power to succeed. They forgot to pray.

Jesus had only been gone one day and already the disciples had forgotten most of what He taught them. They were attempting, by human effort, to remove a foe that was much more powerful than they were. When Jesus gave them authority to cast out demons, it wasn't in their power but in God's power. Their lack of prayer was

typical of their lack of faith. In other words, if they had remembered who Jesus said they were, they would not have forgotten to pray but they would have prayed first. How often do we act first, then after we fail miserably we think about asking God for help?

In the letter to the church in Corinth, Paul says Jesus was not the only one who was changed on that mountain top, Paul says the transfiguration was the basis for all who believe to be led to the knowledge of God.

Listen carefully to Paul's words in this morning's text:

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as through a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

Those are powerful words: *All of us... seeing the glory of the Lord as through a mirror, are being transformed into the same image.* Paul is telling us to remember who we are. We are transformed by our encounter with God, just as Jesus, Elijah and Moses were. In this transformation, you don't feel as if you found something, it's more like something found you. Divine love consumes you and you experience a peace that cannot be explained. You are loved by the creator of Love with a capital "L." God's love lifts the veil from your eyes; it puts to rest your fear of death because you know all things, even death, are in God's hands.

When you are transformed, you realize that you are loved and you are loveable and you become loving. But the strange thing is that you have no control over who you love. All of a sudden you have this desire to and capacity to love everybody: new people, people you already know and even you've never met.

Paul proclaims that Christ sets us free from the Law, but not to do what we want or even to be left alone. We have a covenant with God that we will be the Body of Christ wherever we are, no matter our circumstances. We agree to allow the image of God that is already inside us to shine. No other person in the history of the world is exactly like you. Every person on the planet is a unique creation of God. We also agree to recognize and lift up the unique creation in other people and together to be God's hands and feet in bringing the beloved community into being.

But we have hidden our true identity under a veil of ego, fear and pride. So, instead of being who we were created to be, we spend our lives trying to compensate by worshipping the false gods society pushes on us—power, prestige, possessions, separation from others, abuse of the environment.

Remember who you are.

Jesus commands us to love others, not just feel love. That means we must share God's love with others who are outside our immediate world. To do that means we have to look at the society we live in honestly and admit how the society is structured especially in ways that favor certain groups of God's children over others.

You can't lose God's love, but you can lose its impact if you don't use it. God freely gives love. It's not earned and it applies to everybody—the beggar on the street, the person who cuts you off in traffic, the gang banger drug dealer, the soldier on the other side of the battlefield, all the Freddy Grays of the world and the police who arrest them, both of whom are trapped in a cycle of violence. God even loves the Pittsburgh Steelers and the New York Yankees. So God's love is not ours to hoard.

Jesus had a special love for those on the margins of society—the poor, the oppressed, the sick, the homeless, the imprisoned. If you think about it, that's who Jesus was in his society. Jesus was a poor Jew, a minority race who lived under the thumb of Roman domination. So the man in whom God entrusted his perfect message was a man who lived on the margins.

How do we, like Jesus, love those who are on the margins? The answer comes from St. Francis of Assisi. According to legend, Francis regarded lepers with disgust as did most everybody. One day when he was traveling, a leper blocked his path. Francis gave the man all his money. The man took the money, but still blocked Francis' path.

Francis then took the cloak off his back and put it on the man's shoulders thinking that would be enough. The man took the cloak, but still did not move, Francis did not know what else to do, so he closed his eyes, braced himself and kissed the man on his diseased lips. When Francis opened his eyes, the man had disappeared. Francis realized at that moment that the man had been Jesus in disguise. From that moment on, he decided to treat every leper as if he were the Christ.

Tony Campolo, an evangelical theologian, asks what would happen if every time we looked into the eyes of someone who is ostracized and oppressed, you saw Christ staring back at you. Campolo says:

When this is the case, simple acts of charity are not enough. When the Spirit of God moves you to unfathomable depths of love and the suffering of others

becomes yours ...you will have an irresistibly urgent compulsion to speak on behalf of those who suffer and to fight for a world that is more just.

Too often we just throw money at the poor. That was Francis' first move. Then we figure giving charity—a coat drive, for example—is enough. Francis tried that too. Only when he made the man's suffering his own by kissing the man did he see Christ. Now I am not telling you to go kiss every homeless person or poor person, but I am saying that money and charity are not enough. You must get to know poor people and people of other races as fellow human beings with the same needs and dreams as you have. That requires that you actually come into contact with them, get to know them, respect them, realize their sainthood and finally, take on their suffering as your own. Jesus didn't wait for people to come to his door asking to be healed, he went from village to village seeking those in need.

Remember who you are.

Once you get to know God, you realize that God did not create the mess the world is in today. God did not create war, poverty, racism, greed and class differences. We did and we still do. As the body and mirror image of Christ, we must begin to re-create the society we live in.

Remember who you are.

So what does it mean to be the Body of Christ in Baltimore in 2016? We do what Jesus did. After we spend time with God in prayer and we are transformed, we take the love we have received, share it with others and heal the society around us. But before we can find our true identity, we must admit who we are and ask God to free us to be who we were created to be. For the Presbyterian Church we love that means coming to grips with the fact that even though the Census Bureau predicts that this nation will have a majority of people of color in 30 years and although we profess openness and inclusion, our congregations across the denomination are 93 percent white. We must grapple with the knowledge that in the Baltimore Presbytery of our six predominantly African-American churches, who are in the middle of the dispossessed that Jesus loved, only two can afford a fulltime pastor or that there is only one person of color on our top governing board, the Steering Cabinet.

Brown Memorial and the rest of the Baltimore Presbytery are blessed to be in a position to be a witness for light in the midst of all the darkness that surrounds us. That's why the Presbytery is taking the entire program year to address the issues of race, class and poverty. We intend to be a long-term force standing for justice,

equality and peace in our city. God is moving in our city and our church. Just as the church was the driving moral force behind the Civil Rights Movement we must, once again, be the force that drives a movement for a new normal in America.

Inspired by the love of God for all creation and sustained by our faith, we must be in the front of efforts to say it is a sin that in Maryland, the richest state in the richest nation in the history of the world more than 243,000 children go to bed hungry every night. It is a sin that if you are born poor in America, you will almost always be poor and according to studies. One study pointed out that the one group that had the worst prospects in life in the entire country is poor black males in East Baltimore.

It is a sin for our nation to absorb more mass murders last year than there were days in the year. It is a sin that there are more African American men incarcerated in the U.S. than the total prison populations in India, Argentina, Canada, Lebanon, Japan, Germany, Finland, Israel and England combined.

Nobody wakes up each morning wanting to be poor, to be discriminated against, to face a system that is stacked against you, to face the possibility that you may be killed or arrested before the day is over. But we should wake up each day unwilling to accept a society that tolerates poverty, racism, violence. God's children, our brothers and sisters, should not have to live like that and God's judgement should rain down on us if we don't stand up and do something to change the world we live in.

We all need to look into the mirror of the transfiguration and heed the message Simba was given by the booming voice of James Earl Jones: Remember who you are!

I leave you with the words of Michael Jackson, yes, that Michael Jackson, from his song "The Man in the Mirror."

*I'm gonna make a change
For once in my life
It's gonna feel real good
Gonna make a difference
Gonna make it right*

*As I, turn up the collar on
My favorite winter coat
This wind is blowing my mind
I see the kids in the streets
With not enough to eat
Who am I to be blind?
Pretending not to see their needs*

*I'm starting with the man in the mirror
I'm asking him to change his ways
And no message could have been any clearer
If you want to make the world a better place
Take a look at yourself, and then make a change.*

*If you want to make the world a better place
Take a look at yourself, and then make a change.*

Remember who you are.

Remember who you are.

Amen.