

August 27, 2017

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Sermon: DTR

The Epistle Reading: Romans 12:1-8

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. ³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

The Gospel Lesson: Matthew 16:13-20

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Sermon:

I was just a kid, maybe eight or nine years old, and playing church basketball.

I was awkward and quiet and not good. Thank God for the First Baptist Church of Elkin, North Carolina, who - because of their commitment to the love and grace of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ - allowed me to join their team.

In my memory, I spent most of the season flapping back and forth across the court like a ground-bound bird, blissfully unaware of the game. A lot of the time I was on the appropriate side of the half court line - but not always. I was just happy to be on the team, happy to be unencumbered by things like actual contact with the ball or man-to-man defense. I was right on the cusp of realizing how awkward I was but still living in that place where I was just pleased to be a part of it.

We actually played our games in the gymnasium at the local high school, with its shiny hardwood floors and a big mural that said, "ELKIN HIGH SCHOOL: HOME OF THE BUCKING ELKS!" I had been to a few high school games and it all felt very important.

It was half time and I was wandering away in search of the water fountain, down a hallway. I ran into an older kid - maybe a middle schooler, coming back from the bathroom. He had been watching the game from the stands.

"Hey," he said, looking at me. "I've got a question."

I squinted up at him.

"Are you a queer?" he said. "Cause you seem like you might be."

I didn't know that word, at least not the way he was using it. It was clear though, from his tone, from the friction in the air, that it was a very shameful thing. I decided to act as though he had asked if I was feeling sick to my stomach.

“I think I’m alright,” I said.

He just smirked at me and went back into the gym.

I remember that moment so clearly – less the actual details and more the feeling, that icicle that went straight into my heart. I’ve spent too much time over the years, mulling over that comment, wondering how transparently gay I was, even then. What were the clues?

I long ago arrived at the conclusion that this kid was not some kind of gifted but homophobic Agatha Christie. He was just your garden variety Middle School snake. But what stopped my heart that day was less the content of his accusation and more the realization that other people can *see* you and *perceive* you and *judge* you. And not always from a place of love. Sometimes those labels exercise a terrible power upon you, well before you understand them.

Well before I knew what the words meant, I felt the enormous weight of it and the pressure to *conform*.

By the time I got to middle school, I had quit almost every sports team. It was the beginning of an awful lot of redacting, spinning, calculating, messaging. All in the service of being the person I was supposed to be.

One of the hardest things about working with young people, I have to say, is watching their personalities start to disappear in Middle School. They are so aware of the way in which they are perceived and they are so aware of the stakes. One of the joys of working with young people is watching them gradually re-emerge from those shadows, gradually start to take the risk of using their actual voices. It is *always* an act of bravery, to share your true self with the world. That’s the hard work of being a teenager. But it is also the hard work of being a human being.

Today we get to talk about two Scriptures that deal directly with these questions of perception and identity. Who do we seem to be? Who are we really? And who are we in Christ? I was only seven years old when I grasped the power of the pressures that mold us into false versions of

ourselves. But it would many more years before I fully grasped the power of telling the truth.

“Who do you say that I am?”

What a question to be asked by Jesus. He drops it on the disciples as they are walking down the road and I have to think that it caught them by surprise, because most of the time Jesus is *telling* them who he is, or telling them who *they* are, or pulling coins from fish or walking on water. It would be like Neil Degrasse Tyson asking for *my* take on the solar eclipse. I’m not really prepared to do that, you know?

I do like how Jesus eases into it though, with a more indirect warm-up: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

It’s the equivalent of “I’m asking for a friend.” What are people saying about that guy?

The disciples respond by listing other people that remind them of Jesus. Some say John the Baptist. Some say Elijah. Some say Jeremiah. An indirect answer to an indirect question. Fair enough.

I really appreciate this moment in the story because it constitutes so much of our public religious life. It is much easier to talk *about* Jesus than to talk *to* Jesus. Particularly in seminary, we spent hours of time learning how to summarize what Calvin said about Jesus or what Barth said about Jesus or what Tillich said about Jesus. We spent far less time talking about what we say about Jesus. Too personal.

If the evangelical church offers a full-throated endorsement of Jesus as Lord and Savior, the progressive church is a little more “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” We’d rather offer you an analysis. “Here polls are trending towards John the Baptist. But in these regions, some say Elijah. And, you know, all are welcome.”

I’m joking, but I’m also very sympathetic to the nuance. It’s been one of the many joys of serving at Brown Memorial, all the open-ended honest

questions. But it's worth noting that Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes on to make it personal. "What about *you*? Who do you say that I am?"

Peter delivers the Gold Star answer here, by the way.

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

For his willingness to speak up, Peter is blessed by Jesus and proclaimed the "rock" on which Christ will build his church. Pretty awesome.

And then, Jesus sternly warns them not to tell anyone what Peter just said.

I find that hilarious. If you are a progressive, you may be uncomfortable with Jesus' direct request for a personal relationship. If you are an evangelical, you may be uncomfortable with Jesus' direct request that you really not tell anyone about it. It's enough to make *everyone* uncomfortable, which is Jesus' sweet spot.

But why this weird mix of direct questioning and secrecy? I don't pretend to know for sure, but I think it has something to do the difference between *conforming* and *transforming*.

"Don't be conformed to this world," Paul says in our first reading. That kind of language instantly conjures up inside of me a ton of moralizing voices. "I don't drink and I don't chew and I don't go with boys that do." That kind of voice. There was a time in my Christian life when I heard a message like "Don't be conformed to this world," and my mind went straight to a program. I'm not going to just go with the flow. I'm not going to do it just because everyone is doing it. I'm going to elevate my spirit through righteous living. I'm going to live my life in such a way that Jesus would look at me and say, "Dang. Blessed are *you*." I wanted to be so prepared so that when Jesus asked me, "Who do you say that I am?" I would *nail it*.

So I committed to the program that I understood to be the Christian life. And it was very sincere and very rigorous and very straight-acting and a

teensy bit self-righteous and I don't want to talk about how many years went by before I realized that I was hiding. Hiding from the boy in the basketball gym, hiding from people who might suspect that I was angry, hiding from some very cute boys who drink and chew, hiding from my friends and family, hiding from myself, hiding above all from God.

Hiding and conforming all over again, just under another agenda.

Friends, I don't think that's what God wants for us.

What is the alternative? If we are people who believe in a living God, people who believe that there is such a thing as right and wrong, people who long to be fully engaged in their one and only life? How do we love and serve God without losing the very marrow of ourselves?

I don't think we should discount Paul's first thoughts in Romans 12.

"Present your bodies as a living sacrifice," Paul says, "holy and acceptable to God - that is your spiritual worship. (12:1-2)

I read a very helpful commentary this week that suggests that when Paul uses the word "body," he's not *just* referencing your physical body but actually your entire "body of work." Present your entire body of work, your living and breathing and doing, your accomplishments and your relationships and your desires and your regrets. Present your body of work as a gift to God.

Over time, it has become very important to me to believe that presenting our bodies to God means exactly that. Show God your life. Show God your true self. Show God the parts of you that bring you joy and the parts that bring you shame. Take all of that and offer it up. Not to purge yourself of yourself. But to become available, maybe for the first time, to all that is possible in the beautiful mess that is you.

Imagine offering your life – your actual life, not your Sunday morning life – to God, and imagine hearing God say in response that your offering is holy and acceptable that the very act of offering it is worship. That the raw material of your best and worst can be spun into gold that could

transform you and renew your mind – that is, change the way you think and see yourself in the world.

See, in the end I think it is the giving that matters more than the contents of the offering. The saddest thing I can imagine is not a shoddy offering but the reality that so many of us are playing too small because we think somehow that our offering is not worth it.

It is. It is. Peter was blessed by Jesus and yeah his answer was alright. But above all – when Jesus said, “Who are I am to you?” Peter was the one who was willing to answer. He was willing to open his mouth and say – you are the One who saves me. Jesus got real. Peter got real, and the result, as they say, was church.

That’s why Jesus didn’t want the answer getting out. Because he knew we would just incorporate it into the program. It’s the answering, more than the answer, that matters most.

I’ve thought a lot about what to say today. I am fighting the idea that there is any need for some kind of summary statement or exhaustive list of what my time at Brown Memorial means to me. That’s an impossible task anyway. I wouldn’t know where to start. And you guys aren’t perfect. I think you know that.

But when I’ve reflect on my time here – almost five years – I realize that there are three qualities of Brown Memorial that have made me better. Your generosity. Your bravery. And your freedom.

First, your generosity is insane. I actually try not to think about it too much because if I did I would be undone by the acts of kindness showered on me and Perry by the people of this church. Dinners and gifts and really thoughtful emails and actually even your critical emails are very grammatically correct. A wedding reception with the Soulful Revue singing “Going To The Chapel?” Above all, you’ve been generous with your lives – sharing the guts of your stories and how God has been working on you and in you and through you. I have to say that my faith is stronger for that.

Nowhere is this more true than in our teenagers – my congregation within a congregation. I know that a lot of you don't know them as well as I do and I wish you did because you would be encouraged about our future. Thank you youth of Brown Memorial for setting the bar high on authenticity and love and borderline inappropriate behavior. I have had so much fun and I am so glad that our time together is not over.

Your bravery has taught me to be more brave. I guess example number one is Andrew Foster Connors. I know that you know this but there is a real fire burning in that man and it's like Aslan – not safe but definitely good. I've had the best seat in the house for some incredibly inspiring fights for justice in a city that so badly needs that. I am so inspired by the way this church shows up for a City Council meeting or a Salvadoran civil war. Your bravery is contagious and thank you for infecting me with it.

The last thing is very related to the first two. You guys have given me an incredible freedom to be myself. I've worked in the church for more than a decade but this place is the place where I became a minister. And you let me do that. Not only that, you let me try things. You let me act out stories or start a youth organizing project or put a singing rat in the Christmas pageant. I had ideas and you said yes. I had ideas and you made them better. I wanted talking helicopters for the Christmas pageant but only Jim Veatch could build a thing like that. Brown Memorial is a place where people feel freedom to be themselves and bring their weird and wonderful gifts to share. And that, friends, has made me better.

It's the giving, friends, not the offering, that transforms us. Yes, God is asking for our whole lives. But that's because when it comes to redemption, God leaves nothing on the table. Yes, God is asking for our whole lives, but not so we get ground down into joyless Christian robots, but so that we can bring our whole lives to bear in the work of transforming the world. Our weird and particular actual lives are the rocks on which God builds the church. Jesus wants to know who we say he is. And of course, he wants to know who we actually are. Because

that's how love works. That's what Paul means, I think, when he says that in the one body there are many members – and not all the same. So be generous, be brave, and be free. Give the fullness of yourself to God and see what God will give you in return. My suspicion is that neither you nor the world will be the same.

“Are you a queer?” he said to me, with that mean smile. Basketballs pounded the floor behind him like native drums. “Because you seem like you might be.”

Why yes, I say now. I am queer. Different. Also just gay. Fearfully and wonderfully made. A flapping ground-bird of awkwardness and love and wonder and fear. Gifted in ways that will take years to discover and flawed in ways that may never be fixed. Never not afraid. Never not uncertain. Frequently surprised by grace. Capable, actually, of an astonishing amount of courage and love.

“And you know what?” I say, to the boy. His face is still mean but I see him differently now, through the lens of my renewed mind. “You know what? So are you.”