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Matthew 16:21-28

Jeremiah 15:15-21

Psalms 26:1-8

Romans 12:9-21

August 30, 2020

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

What makes you, you? Is it the clothes that you wear or where you work? Is it how you talk or where you grew up? Is it a particular talent or belief?

When I worked at the University of Richmond, one of my roles was to lead diversity training workshops. In one of the activities, we tackled this exact question. What makes you, you? We asked the students to list the 5 main words or phrases that they would use to identify themselves.

Here's an example...My five would be: Clergy, Mother, Nature lover, Horseback Rider, Wife.

Let me now ask you the same question... what 5 words would you use to define *you*? Take a moment to reflect on those...write them down if you can.

Did you create these 5 identifiers all on your own? Or, are they a product of the people, places, and experiences that influenced your life up to this point (good or bad)?

When you start to look back over your life, you quickly realize, you didn't get to where you are all by yourself. You were taught, mentored, encouraged. You made mistakes and faced the consequences. You succeeded and were empowered. You were hurt and you survived. And, if you consider each situation that defined you, many, if not all of them, happened as part of relationship.

Because as much as we might like to think we are self-made individuals, I would offer that we are far from self-made. And, we shouldn't want to be.

There is this beautiful concept from southern Africa called Ubuntu...which means, "I am because you are." Bishop Desmond Tutu describes it as our common humanity bound together in life. We are a person only thru other persons. It's a powerful concept of unity deep within the fabric of who we are as human beings.

Here is something interesting...when mapping the human genome, scientists found that we are 99.9% the same. Meaning, within our genetic makeup of 3 billion base molecules, we differ by only .1%. That 1/10 of a percentage creates the beautiful variation in who we are as humans to be sure...the things that define our hair color, our personalities, our talents. The things we cling to as our unique identity.

But, the human genome reveals that the stronger identifying characteristic for all of us is not our individual, unique attributes but our common, unifying attributes...the 99.9% that we are similar.

I am because you are.

I am because we are.

Bishop Tutu says that Ubuntu, the reality of our common humanity requires one very important thing...it requires love and he admits that that isn't always easy, especially in our world that upholds the unique over the greater whole.

In other words, love becomes elusive when we become so fixated on our differences, the differences that divide, the differences we resist, the differences we use to define and exclude. That's the 1/10 of a percentage that we cling to over the 99.9% of what makes us the same. And that 1/10 of a percentage is often our stumbling block to love.

We yell out...I am! I am! I am!

And, when we do that, we know the outcome...division, fear, hatred, discrimination, abuse, inequality. When "I am" becomes the only thing that matters, when we define ourselves apart from one another, our 1/10th makes it very hard to love someone's else's 1/10 of a percentage.

But, Desmond Tutu offers encouraging words. We don't have to live that way if we allow what is common in our humanity to soften our hearts and open our minds. Love does not emerge out of perfect environments, or perfect people for that matter.

In Paul's letter to the church in Rome, he was teaching about what this means.

"Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection. Extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

That's Ubuntu. That's our step by step guide for living out our common humanity.

Now, I want us all to take a deep breath. We can all acknowledge that it's really, really tough to get it right. We need one another to help us through...we can't be self-made practitioners of this kind of love. It's takes full-hearted, honest relationship with one another. People to help redirect us, to encourage us, to show us a better way.

That's just what Jesus does for Peter in the Gospel reading. He draws Peter into relationship so that Peter can get it right (or at least work on it for a bit). Peter is stumbling over his sense of

who he is and what he thinks he knows. He wants Jesus to do what is comfortable for him based upon his individual sense of right and wrong.

When Jesus sees Peter veering off track he says, "Get behind me, Satan" Now, we often hear these words as a harsh rebuke. In actuality, Jesus is being a guiding presence, reminding Peter to remember he is there to learn and grow in community alongside Jesus. The Greek translation of this phrase isn't a rebuke at all. It is an encouragement that is better translated, Peter...follow me. Get behind me so that you can learn.

I am because we are. Together.

Folks...I can't tell you how much I want all of us to reflect on what this means for our lives today. We have just finished 2 political conventions. I watched them both. What stood out to me more than anything is the question of how we are going to live out our common humanity during this extremely troubled and divided time. We all have an opportunity in front of us. We have an opportunity to remember we are not self-made but we are a product of our community. We are a product of our unity. We are a product of our love.

It's very easy in these kinds of divisive times to draw our lines in the sand and stake our claims on our so called individual liberties. But, we are not just individuals. We are a community. And that matters. It matters to God.

So when tensions get high, when you see division rising up in your own heart (which it will do) I want you to reread our text from Romans. I want you to remember that Jesus said, follow me. Follow me and let love be genuine. Follow me and hold fast to what is good. Follow me and extend hospitality and bless your enemies. Follow me and do not proclaim to be wiser than you are. Follow me and live peaceably with all.

I am because we are.

Thanks be to God. Amen.