

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Joy Caires
Sunday, August 18, 2019
St. James' the Fisherman, Wellfleet, MA

Who I am and who I belong to was drilled into me as a child. Born and raised on Maui, keiki o ka aina, a child of the land. Granddaughter of “Billy O”, looking like a Medeiros, a descendent of missionaries on one side, migrants on the other.

English, Irish, Scottish, Welsh, French, Portuguese, Japanese...the litany of ethnicities and ancestry was a formidable one.

My mother being the storyteller, the story of my family, was slanted towards the missionary side. My grandfather who'd campaigned for statehood, the great grandfather who had been Queen Liliokalani's friend as well as one of the overthrowers of the Hawaiian monarchy (not to be shared at school), the great-great grandfather who'd been a missionary doctor. My grandmother, my Tutu, would hold court at the 4th of July parade and I would enjoy the attention of family friends and acquaintances who would know me as “Sallie Mae's oldest girl” or “Billy O's granddaughter”.

I knew who I was and located myself by my lineage.

But, this knowledge of self was conditional. Far removed from any missionary wealth or inheritance, my mother's histories detailed stories of mental illness, betrayal, and loss. The haves had had, and no longer were what once they knew.

And, so I learned that it was the Smith side who married the Baldwins. The Baldwins who inherited the money, to whom I should be nice. I knew who the major shareholders were, and who we were not, for it was my mother whose ancestors had owned the dairy who then married a man whose ancestors had worked for the dairy. And, so Smith became Caires who once were Freitas who had married a Medeiros who had left Sao Miguel for Brazil and married a man from Japan...resulting in children who tanned easily and whose eye color varied from blue to black and who knew where they belonged.

Where they belonged, on an island in the middle of an ocean, where the who of our being was as complicated as the history of the land.

Class, culture, race, ethnicity, history, culture, and context. As long as I stayed on the land, I knew who I was. As long as I stayed located in my family of origin, I knew to whom I belonged. Lineage, allegiances, the genetic roulette of skin tone and eye color...all of which made sense in the middle of the Pacific, all of which ceased to matter when I could no longer meet the conditions of my birth.

And, hence, unmoored from the original who and to whom...I began to look for connections that could not be severed by time, distance, or even my own disobedience.

Which is where I found the church.

The church. Where, as an angsty teen, disaffected from her family of origin and searching for safe harbor, I found a place that could hold me when the familial structures had failed me.

And, in this, I can hear the good news of the Gospel we heard proclaimed today. Good news, for anyone who has been failed by the structures of secular society and the organizing principles thereof. Good news for anyone whose life has been limited by systemic injustice. Good news.

Good news when what the world needs is for systemic injustice to be overturned by a new way of being in the world. A way in which those who have been rejected, lost, or left behind, are claimed by an all-embracing God.

This is the who and this is the whom. In the love of God we find ourselves—beloved child of God, of the God who has made us all.

All...not some. And in this we are liberated from the familial or cultural structures that would define us as anything--anything apart from the love of God.

Division from that which holds us captive is, in fact, liberation.

But, to be clear, this does not come without cost. Because, when we are separated from those structures that have given us meaning, there is pain to be had. This is what makes this particular Gospel passage read as apocalyptic—because, for those of us whose identity, status, power and privilege is maintained through familial lines and identity, the severing of those lines means loss. Loss of power, of privilege, loss of identity, loss of honor, and loss of wealth.

Yes, wealth. The inheritance of wealth, of land, of honor, of property, of stocks—in this case livestock—was, quite fundamentally, the why of tracking ancestry. Maintaining wealth across generations, and the attendant power and privilege, has been a driver for the maintenance of traditional family structures for millennial. This is not to discount the interconnection of family, the deep love, care and support we may find there, or to attack the pride we may find in knowing our personal stories. Knowledge of our past and those whose lives have led to our own can be life-giving and help us to locate ourselves as individuals in the world. And yet, here we are...

With a Gospel that is uncompromising in its assertion that unity for the sake of wealth, honor, and privilege is to our shame—while unity for the sake of the good news of God in Christ is our honor.

When someone is baptized in the church, they are presented by their sponsors with their full given name. You will note that as the baptismal liturgy continues, it is only the first (and perhaps middle) name that is used in the liturgy. Baby **Archie** Harrison Mountbatten-Windsor, as storied as his name may be, was christened Archie. By doing so, it is made clear that his legacy is not in his name, but in the vast communion of saints of which he is now part.

He is part of the household of God, just as I am. Connected by virtue of our baptism, not the conditions of our birth. And, whilst the world may insist otherwise—ranking our lives and our worth by our forebears—the teachings of our faith and the truth of God's love have given us another claim.

Each of us, principally and most importantly, a beloved child of God.

Imagine. Imagine what living into that truth, in its entirety could be like.

Imagine...

No name, no rank, no allegiances, other than that of the beloved. The beloved of God.

How would we be? How would our interactions individually and collectively be transformed if we were to live this truth?

Imagine...

That imagining is fundamental to how the early church understood itself. Part of the threat the early Christian church presented to the empire was its insistence upon the full personhood of every baptized member. No longer slave nor free, male nor female. The cultural constructs of race, class, family, and inherited hierarchy, are set aside in favor of a new ideal.

A new ideal...

The ideal of belovedness by virtue of birth, inheritance by virtue of baptism, and honor by virtue of the shame that was no shame upon the cross.

No shame in our birth, no shame in our lineage, no shame in our inheritance...

No shame.

No shame...

because we are made one, by virtue of the love of God which knows the truth of our suffering and the joy of our being.

The joy of our being when we know who we are and to whom we belong,

As beloved children of God.

Amen.