

“Changed”

Polo First United Methodist Church
Polo, IL

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

February 5, 2012 (5th after Epiphany)

Prayer: Living God, help us to hear your Word that we may truly understand; that, in understanding, we may believe; and in believing, we may follow your way in all faithfulness, seeking your honor and glory in all that we do. Amen.

It was six in the morning. I was sitting in a family consult room in the Emergency Department of Duke University Hospital. At first I was in the room with just a mother and a father. Their seven year-old son had been at the hospital for a routine operation and had unexpectedly stopped breathing. The child was currently in an operation to hook him up to a pump to work his heart for him.

I had gotten to know them a little bit, asking about their child especially. I learned his nickname, and what he liked to do for fun. I listened as they expressed their pain and grief and fears. I listened to them ask questions, like why this would happen to their son. I didn't have a good answer for them. Eventually we just sat in silence.

As the time passed more and more people from the family started showing up. First their 21 year-old daughter got there. When she walked into the room she looked at me like I was the strangest person that she had ever seen. The same was true when their 24 year-old son and his girlfriend arrived at the tiny room. Then the mother's two sisters came as well. And we were all packed in that room together. As each new person entered the room, the mother introduced me as the chaplain. They just kind of stared at me. And asked me all kinds of questions that a non-medical person was unfit to answer. I asked if they wanted me to leave, so they could have some time to themselves, but the mother insisted that I stay, so I did.

We sat there, each person awkwardly silent, looking mostly at the floor not wanting to lock eyes with anyone else. They waited, there was nothing else for them to do.

As I sat there, I looked from face to face. I was definitely out of place. Me a 25 year old, white man from Illinois. A chaplain intern in the Masters of Divinity program at Duke Divinity School. By all accounts I had nothing in common with these people. But as I looked into their faces, saw their tears, felt their anxiety, I recognized them somehow.

Even though I had never met these people before in my life, they were oddly familiar to me. It was like I knew exactly who they were.

After a few more hours I prayed with them one more time, and left because my shift was over, I sent the incoming chaplain to be with them.

The whole next day the faces of that family stayed with me. And I kept wondering how I recognized them. I had never seen them before in my entire life, but yet it was like I knew exactly who they were.

Then one of my friends posted a quote on Facebook later that day. It said, “I do not believe the difference between any two human beings is ever greater than the sum of what they have in common.”

Immediately I knew, that was it! That’s how I knew them, that how I recognized them. How could I have forgotten?

That key thing that we share in common, the things that I had forgotten but remembered in that moment, is found in our Scripture lesson for today. Think about the story, sit back and imagine it in your mind’s eye.

Imagine John in his clothing of camel’s hair and his breath reeking of locusts. Imagine Jesus coming to John, wading into the waters of the Jordan River a brief chill coming up his neck as he gets used to the coldness of the water. There is a brief dispute between the two cousins, Jesus should be baptizing John, not the other way around. But eventually John places his arm around Jesus’ back and dunks him under the waves of the water, completely immersed. One, two, three seconds later Jesus’ body breaks the surface and he’s bathed in the light from above. Jesus shakes the water from his head, wiping his eyes clear so he can see again. Then suddenly the heavens are torn open and the Spirit of God rushes down. A voice says, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

Take in those words: this is my Son, my child, my kiddo. My beloved, the one I love. I am well pleased with you. You makes me so happy. I’m filled with such joy because of you.

That’s what we have in common.

“The whole Christian gospel could be summed up in this point,” writes N.T. Wright, “that when the living God looks at us, at every baptized and believing Christian, [as well as everyone else], he says to us what he said to Jesus on that day. He sees us, not as we are in ourselves, but as we are in Jesus Christ.”

It may seem impossible, especially when we look and see so many differences, so many ways that we have fallen short. It doesn’t seem possible, when it may be that we’ve never heard this

from anyone else in our entire lives, but it's true: "God looks at us, and says, 'You are my dear, dear child; I'm delighted with you.'"¹

Mark Foster, a pastor in Oklahoma, who was the speaker at ICD this last week put it this way: "If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If God had a wallet, you know what you'd find inside? Your picture!" Because you are God's beloved. You are precious to the Lord. In all of your uniqueness and individuality, you are dearly loved and God is pleased with you.

How often do we forget that? We get lost in pride or jealousy or consumed with power. We look in the mirror and all we see is what we don't want to be. When we're in one of the loneliest places of our life, and we can't believe in grace. When we're afraid, or confronted with change, and we can't receive love anymore. Do you ever forget, that God says, "You are my beloved child."

How often do we forget that when we are dealing with other people? All we see is someone who's not smart enough, or educated enough, or talented enough, or good enough. We see someone different than us, someone who we think we're better than. Do we ever remember that God says even to them, "They are my beloved children too. I am pleased with them just as much as I am pleased with you."

That's what we have in common. And it is greater than all the differences we could possibly have with each other. So don't forget it. Don't forget that you, and we, and them, are all dearly beloved by God.

When we forget this about ourselves. When we forget this about others. We need to be reminded. We need to read this Scripture. We need to come to the waters. To be reminded. We need to ask God to tell us once again, who we are to him, who we all are to him.

So as we come forward in a little while, for the sacraments, let's be reminded of who we are, and who each other is. And let that reminder fill us and shape us and change us more fully into the people that God sees us as.

Amen.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).