

Wherever You Go

Mark 12:28-34

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When I was younger, my grandfather, my Pepere would pick me up off of the school bus, which was particularly exciting for me. I used to think about all the amazing things waiting for me at Pepere's house. Would we read or play or go to the park? And the biggest question of all, would there be mac and cheese for lunch? Almost always! However as excited as I was, I would fall asleep approximately 10 minutes into the bus ride home. Not even the promise of mac and cheese could keep me awake. So the bus driver and my grandfather would regularly have to wake me up, so I would go inside to take a good nap.

And every fall, without hesitation, my Pepere would tell me "You've been sleepwalking again! The leaves changed colors while you were asleep, so you must have painted them!" and as a five-year-old I wanted to believe that I was magical enough to paint the millions of leaves I saw. I would look at my paintbrushes and imagine all the work that I must have put into painting in my sleep, and I imagined climbing all the trees, and lots of the silly impossibilities that suddenly became my new found responsibility in the fall.

While we're talking about leaves, let's check in with our scientists over there! How is our science experiment going? Any changes?

In today's scripture, we see Jesus debating scriptural analysis with teachers. When a teacher notices Jesus' unique ability to answer, he asks about a topic that was likely quite a heated debate at the time, what commandment is the most important? Jesus then turns around and gives two, Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Now there is absolutely nothing new about these commandments. They have been said time and time before, and Jesus actively takes them from the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. This was old even 2000 years ago. Even a quick Google search will show a version of the golden rule in almost every religion in the world. This commandment is nothing revolutionary, and yet, inherently revolutionary. It is the foundation of Christian love.

To love our neighbor as ourselves? Ha, it's hard enough to like ourselves sometimes, never mind to love our neighbors. I mean, I can sit here and within thirty seconds recall every embarrassing moment of middle school, complete with the feeling of horror with every mistake and find all the backup evidence of it all on Facebook. I thought matching argyle with argyle was cool. And that did not age well. How do you love yourself knowing and carrying all of the mistakes, embarrassing and serious that you've made? How do we love others knowing their mistakes too?

Love is not a feeling, it's an action, and when we do it right it's not swayed by mistakes and imperfections. We do not have to be perfect to be loved. God loves us infinitely and perfectly, abundantly the moment we are born. God makes us in God's own image, exactly as we are, as a part of God's creation. In Bishop Curry's book, *Love is the Way*, he identifies loving our neighbor as relating to them as someone made in God's image, and loving ourselves as relating to us as made in God's image. It's God's love through and through.

Relating to ourselves as made in God's image means accepting our whole selves, argyle sweaters and all, and sharing our gifts with the world. This past year, you've heard almost all of us talk

about finding the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet, and it's coming up again! Bishop Curry tells us that when we know, nurture and ultimately share our true selves, we breathe God's love into every space we inhabit. And that's powerful.

We see examples of this all throughout creation. Many of us identify woods, beaches, lakes, as particularly holy to us, which makes sense. Our "thin spaces" tend to be in spots where creation is uninhibited and exists as it was made, sharing God's love with us.

Which makes me feel pretty silly for ever believing that I could paint anything as glorious as the changing leaves in God's creation. The leaves' color transformation into fall was not due to my own magic but rather the glorious sacredness of God's creation going through transition perfectly through its own imperfection.

Did you know that leaves don't technically even change colors? The green we see is actually something called chlorophyll, which is a small molecule inside the cells of the leaf that make the Sun's energy into food for the tree. But as you can imagine, in the fall there's less light, and the leaves can't make enough energy for the tree, and so they get rid of their chlorophyll, and fall off the tree.

The colors that we see in fall are always what's underneath the leaves, their true colors. Our science experiment today shows exactly that. Friends, let's do our last check in! Scientists, what's going on?

So as we can see, the rubbing alcohol took out all of the green chlorophyll, and then took out the other colors, so we can see what the true colors of the leaves are! Aren't they beautiful? And without the change of the seasons we would never even know about all these beautiful colors!

Friends, transition and recreation is a part of Creation. Leaves change from season to season. The sun sets and rises each day. Caterpillars become butterflies, birds migrate, bulbs grow into flowers, fish swim upriver and so much more. Why would we be any different? Our bodies, our beings are finite, they are imperfect, they are limited, and divinely made that way. Living into who we are is not about being perfect or in control at all times. It's about becoming a part of God's transitions and renewal and finding ourselves again and again. And my god, is it hard.

For the past month, I've been referring to this as my life-long sermon, and not just because 12 minutes feels impossibly long. Quite honestly, I never thought I'd settle on an answer to how to relate to myself as made in the image of God, and I realized that's because there is no settled answer. Because we are ever-changing and transforming, our relationship to ourselves, and others is a lifelong process of searching for God's call in who we are. And that's hard work.

Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to Love God, with all our hearts, with all our soul, with all our minds, with all our strength. We are called to love with all that we are and with all that we have and how do we do that if we don't even know what that is? We search for God's image, God's love within ourselves and learn to cultivate it. And It's a journey, a three-way relationship between God, our neighbors and that never ends and is always changing.

In her Book, *Native*, Kaitlen Curtice shares her story and journey into her ever-evolving identity as a Potawatomi woman, and search for truth. She poignantly asks the question, how do we prepare for the search? Over the past two years, I've watched this community engage in this

same question. How do we begin to find ourselves again in transition? And I've learned three important lessons in transition from you all.

The first is to know who you've been. I've heard countless stories of the amazing ministries this church has led in the town of West Hartford, including amazing children's ministry. From large choirs, to service work to innovative spiritual directioning, this church has had a clear identity in the community for 300+ years. And I watched this church as it worked with the Concerned Parents of Color in West Hartford. This church spent the better part of a year coming to terms with its historical relationship to slavery and colonialism within this past year, as a part of renaming Unity green. Throughout this process Barbara Lewis wrote the land acknowledgement that we used to start our worship today. This past year, I've watched you all grapple with holding the two stories of this community and still find God's love in it.

The second lesson I've learned from you all is knowing where you are. Being grounded in the moment as change is happening is hard work. Personally I constantly feel like I'm trying to cling to whatever I can, but that's not living into who I am but rather who I was. In the pandemic, things shifted constantly, and we regularly made the joke that we had to begin planning to plan because it was impossible to find solid ground. But I watch our leadership here let go and lean into the new present spaces for growth, finding our identity again and again.

The third lesson is knowing where you want to go. And that's something this church does well again and again. I mean look at these lights, this sanctuary, and all this live streaming equipment. Only a year ago, this congregation decided engaging in an online community has become a critical part of its mission, and not knowing much of the specifics, we found our way here. Of course Jim's and other leaders' expertise and intense research served as a guide, but in a lot of ways, identifying this shared core value, kept this goal in view, and helped center God's love in the process.

As we finish today, I want to take a moment for us all to reflect on the search for our own identities. Most of you in this room have many more years of experience searching, and likely have found places where you see God's image made within you. As you came in today you took a piece of colored paper. On this paper, I want you to write one special thing about you that is made in God's image.

How can you nurture and share this piece of your true self? In what ways does it breathe God's love into every space you inhabit? In what ways can you do better?

Beloved, you are created in the image of God. And you are called to love God with the wholeness of that image. And by living into, nurturing, and sharing God's image within ourselves, we share God's love in every space we go and can begin to love our neighbors more fully and deeply than we can imagine.

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