

## Making Room for the True Self

Mark 8:31-38

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

Today is our second week exploring the legacy and the wisdom of 20<sup>th</sup> century mystical theologian Howard Thurman. Last Sunday, we began by considering silence as the place where we meet with God. Today, I want to look at another idea that is central to Thurman's work, and has been picked up by other Christian teachers, most notably Richard Rohr—this is the idea of the True Self. We begin, however, with Jesus, who also taught a thing or two about understanding our Self. This is Mark's Gospel, chapter 8:

<sup>31</sup> Then Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes and be killed and after three days rise again. <sup>32</sup> He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. <sup>33</sup> But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

<sup>34</sup> He called the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. <sup>35</sup> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

People have been pondering the mystery of the Self forever. In ancient Greece, on a hill, at the place the Greeks believed was the very center of the world, sat the oracle of Delphi. Any person could come and ask the oracle a question and receive an answer, through the oracle, directly from the gods. By the way, the oracle was always a middle-aged woman and we shouldn't let it slip that the Greeks knew that all the secrets of the world could be answered by a middle-aged woman. Who doesn't want to know life's destiny—who doesn't want to know what our future holds? People came from all over with questions great and small for the oracle. But Delphi wasn't just a future vision vending machine. According to the Greeks who documented the oracle, her predictions were... indirect, confusing, poetic, even paradoxical. A king famously asked the oracle if he should wage war against his enemy. The oracle said, "you *will* destroy a great empire." So the king plunged into battle and was trounced. He *did* destroy a great empire—he just never imagined the oracle meant *his*.

The answers the oracle gave to our questions required us to think more deeply, required us to see things in a new way. That's hard. It takes great courage and humility to admit we don't know everything. One of Socrates' famous sayings was, "I know that I know nothing." Humility is the door through which truth enters. We know little about the world—and less about ourselves. Above the entrance to the Temple at Delphi, visible to anyone who wanted the oracle's guidance, was a phrase in gold that said: "Know thyself."

Is there any wisdom more essential than how we answer the question, "who am I?"

Who are you? Every one of you started life as a mystery to others and to yourself. Each of you has to learn, from scratch, who you are. Socrates and Buddha and Jesus have all existed before, but their wisdom doesn't do you a lick of good. You have to do your own work of self-exploration. You pick up evidence along the way from teachers, mentors, from stories, friends, therapy, prayer—from the joys and sorrows of life. But living is hard and self-knowledge gleaned from living is even harder.

Some of us avoid self-knowledge. The world is, after all, happy to tell us who we are, save us the work. Organizations will tell you who exactly who they think you are so they can use you for their purposes. People around us have their own ideas about who we are. People can be cruel; jealous; callous. They can call us names and tell us we're not good enough until we might even believe them. The image I selected for this morning is a contemporary piece by Molly Crabapple in which the artist draws herself and then inscribes across her face things people have written about her and her work on social media. Voices that demean or degrade us—even from people who claim to love us, are strong. They embed themselves in our self-knowledge.

As we grow up, the world relentlessly pushes us to be useful. And we confuse usefulness with identity. We hone a craft and take up a job, like caregiving, or teaching, fixing things, selling things, analyzing numbers, parenting. This work, this role, becomes so central to our life, we begin to think "this is me." It may take losing that job or retiring or divorce to expose the illusion that our identity is the work we do or the roles we play.

In recent years, people are remembering that our identity is always grounded in a physical body. Our identity doesn't float. Whoever you are, you are in a body. You are a particular mass of cells, billions of nerve endings firing. You are an organism, evolved by natural selection over millions of years. The neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky has advocated reclaiming embodiment, but he's taken the idea to such an extreme that he's got people riled up. Sapolsky's newest book is called, "Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will." According to Sapolsky, each of us is our biology. You think you're a person acting with agency upon the world, but that feeling of agency is just the firing of your neurons.

Sapolsky says that instead of being caught up in all of our moralism—the "shoulds" and "oughts" that make us feel guilt or shame—instead of getting all twisted up about who we are, he says the answer is always the same: "my biology made me do it." It leads him to a Buddhist-like detachment. Yet even Sapolsky says that we human beings do *feel* like we have agency. He says that feeling is a fiction, a story we make up. But I bet many of you would say that that fiction *is* the essence of being alive. Your self is a story. Why not make it a beautiful story?

That's one thing that religion does. Religion gives us some wonderful stories that offer ideas about what it means to be a human being—what life is for, who we are to one another, what makes a life "good" and "beautiful," and what happens when our life ends.

In Christianity, our answer to the question "who am I" always comes back to God. In our story, you are created as one part of the intricate fabric of God's "good" creation. Even more than

that, our story says you are created “in the image of God.” There is something about your self that is inseparable from God’s self. Who are you? We say, “you belong to God’s good creation, you are created in God’s image, you are God’s Beloved child. You are created by love and for the purpose of love. Your purpose is to love God, creation, neighbor, and self.”

That’s our Christian identity. We could stop there, except for one thing: when you look at the way I act, or you act, we don’t really resemble God. Something separates us from our identity. Instead of acting in a way that is loving, and merciful, and just, we’re yucky a lot of the time. This is why our Christian story talks about sin; we’re trying to find language to describe what feels like our separation from our True Self.

That separation is drawn in today’s scripture. In the middle of Mark’s gospel, Peter calls Jesus the Messiah—the Anointed One of God. This declaration should be the cause for celebration because they know that God has sent us someone to restore us to ourselves, to restore God’s rule of justice on earth—to set all things right. But then Jesus says that he is going to suffer and die... and be raised.

The disciples are confused and angry. Because they know better. Messiahs assume the seat of power. Messiahs rule over people. They don’t die. Jesus keeps talking—and as he does, it is clear that he is asking us to re-learn what it is to be a human being—one created by love and for love. He’s re-framing for us what it is to be a Self, made in the image of God:

“If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

Jesus sounds a bit like the oracle of Delphi. Like maybe he’s asking you to do a bit more thinking, expecting you to work a bit, maybe even asking you let go of what you assume to be true, and see the world in a new way.

Jesus is saying that at the heart of every *good* life is loss. We have to turn our face toward loss. What is this loss—what is this taking up a cross, what is this denial of the self, what is the death Jesus says we must embrace?

- is it that we must give up a self-image tied to accomplishment or wealth or competency
- is it the recognition that if I live in love, I will always be pouring out myself, with no assurance that I will receive back what I give
- is it recognizing that in the world we live, for me to live in a way that affirms human dignity, I might have to suffer
- is it simply facing the loss of knowing that you have but one life, that you must choose one path—the path of greatest integrity—and accept the consequences?

One of the great gifts of Howard Thurman’s teaching and preaching and writing, is his affirmation that each of us can—and must—discover our own True Self—that we are each a

Beloved Child of God. Thurman himself was grounded in an awareness of his belovedness from an early age. He describes in detail life experiences—at home, underneath a favorite tree, or hearing his grandmother speak to him, feeling a sense of communion with others—that assured him in that he was, above all things—beneath all things, Beloved. A sense of universal human belovedness permeates Thurman’s work. I sometimes think, in today’s world, the affirmation that “we are all God’s children” can sound saccharine and meaningless. But when you realize that Thurman came to this realization as a Black man living in the Jim Crow South, when the world around him was sending him the message that he was worthless, it’s stunning to hear that Thurman knew, deep down, a different story, a different truth.

Thurman is under no illusion that for any of us, the process of discovering our beloved identity will be easy. It’s not easy because the world is always trying to teach us we are something else. It’s not easy because the world is often unjust and unfair, and the process of staying alive can force us to embrace values that move us away from our True Self. In *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Thurman writes that for those who are oppressed and who live with our backs to the wall, fear, deception, and hatred become some of our most effective survival strategies. But those same strategies, over time, he writes compromise our humanity, they erode our dignity. When we live with fear, deception, and hatred, it prevents us from being able to imagine the world that Jesus imagines—a world in which even enemies are transformed by self-giving love.

Thurman knew, like Jesus, we have to die even to the ways of being that help us survive; we must face this loss, this death, in order to awaken to the free flow of love that is the True Self.

Howard Thurman taught that the journey of discovering one’s Self is the greatest journey you will ever take. It may lead you to the ends of the earth. Thurman knew, with Jesus, that coming to the True Self requires you to face significant loss. But Thurman also believed—and knew from experience—that no matter how far we travel, no matter how difficult and wrenching the journey of self knowledge is, our True Self is never far from us. It is always within us. Beneath the swirling surface of our lives, your True Self abides in the quiet center of your body, of your life. God placed it there when you were created. And always, quietly, it calls:

There is something in everyone of you that waits, listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself and if you can not hear it, you will never find whatever it is for which you are searching

There is a great love at the center of all things. A love that forgives you, heals you, mends you at your broken places, and holds you in communion with God with others.

Listen for the sound of the genuine.

