

“WHO DECIDES WHO WE REALLY ARE?”

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One Sunday William Willimon found himself as a guest worshiping at an African-American church. He found an exuberantly joyous outpouring of praise welling up and spilling over in crescendos typical of the Black church. Do try it sometime.

Of course, the service was not circumscribed by our familiar one-hour time slot. The choir lit up two anthems. But that reminded the choir director of another, so they extemporized a third. There was the regular offering and a mission offering. When those offerings didn't amount to much, they repeated them, preceded by a lengthy and fervent appeal. And then the sermon followed. It started, quiet and hushed, then swung upward, ending with a flurry of passion. These many movements took up time and space. All told, the morning worship exceeded two hours.

So after this full morning Willimon stood in the church parking lot with his black preacher friend, his pulpit gown draped over his arm. They were ready to part. This was good, Willimon thanked him. It's *always* good to worship with you. But may I just ask you one question? Sure, his pastoral colleague said, what is it? Why does it take you folks so long to worship God? I mean, I had six cups of coffee this morning. I was dying up there. His pastoral friend could only chuckle.

“Why does it take us so long to worship God?” he smiled at the question. “Look around you.” Not surprisingly, the church was not poised on a posh side of town. Urban blight was visible in all directions. Billboards, with their casino, liquor, and cigarette ads, glared down at them. “Why does it take us so long to praise God?”

“All week long the people of my church hear the message, they're nothing. They don't matter. They are invisible. They are worthless. You see, they don't have the great jobs, drive the right cars, or live at the toney addresses. They aren't invited to meetings where matters of life get decided. They live at the margins. In the great rat race of getting ahead, my people are perceived as the scruffiest of rats.”

“So it's my job on Sundays to persuade them *all of that is a lie*. Don't you believe it! Because they are God's beloved children, they do matter. God's eye is ever on them. The councils of heaven pray for them. They are *precious* to God. Where I live, because many lies constantly surround us, so much despair to reverse, we need a couple hours of worship. How long does that take you with your people?”

Well, that turned Willimon's head around. And it might turn our heads around too. At the very least, this story reminds us that you don't come to worship to get a ticket punched. You're not checking something off a list. You're not doing a duty. The reason Christians worship God is so we can strip you of the false, idolatrous stories that have found their inside of you and renarrate your life with God's truth.

You come to worship so you can forsake lives of despair and find lives of hope. You come to worship to be equipped with who you truly are as a beloved child of God when others have made you a cog in a machine or a shill for making money.

Yes, we can plan, shape and abbreviate Sunday morning worship. But a task so monumental as this doesn't always tidily fit in one hour increments. Worship is about something powerful, formative and centrally defining of who you are and who you'll be, equipping you with that to face your week. Please bear this in mind if we go five or seven minutes over. We do not ask hours of your time, like Moses Mather did when this church was founded. Perhaps we should in a day when we spend weekly an average of 32 hours watching TV and another 16 hours online.

One brief hour is precious little to shed all those layers of lies in ads and pop culture. Finally, we aren't merely producers or consumers. We aren't merely salaries or degrees or family pedigrees. Our bodies aren't props to boost fashion houses, or something far less if we're not supermodel perfect, which few of us are. We're constantly exposed to such lies. We hear them enough, we start to believe them.

Where else but the church can we go to hear the one truth foundational to living a sane, strong, and contented life? That truth is articulated at baptism more than anywhere else. We hear it in that voice booming from heaven at Jesus' baptism.

As this message blessed Jesus starting his ministry, so also it blesses us along life's way. For Jesus spread those words God spoke over him to all of his own. And it goes something like this: "You're beloved to me. You are my child, my son, my daughter. You belong to me and I claim you, despite the worst you do. You did nothing to deserve this belovedness, but live into it--and live up to it--anyway. For everything in this lifetime can be taken away from you: your health, your wealth, your children, your good name, and your accomplishments. But this belovedness endures forever. It's there waiting for you whenever you need it most."

Friends, this message is not so much Bible study or theology or sermon as *life itself*. In the same way I did my best to impart it to your children today, I did my utmost to share it with my own daughters. Today we hear the heart of the gospel. If I could give you one message, that you in turn give your young, this is the one: "You are God's beloved child." It is your comfort, your shield, and your final hope.

I remember once when our family of divorce was doing poorly. I stopped home early and found Lise sitting on her bed crying. She had had a painful argument. So I took her hands, looked her in the eye and I told her this story of Jesus' baptism, how the heavens opened and God pronounced these words over Jesus. "You're my Son, the Beloved, with you I'm well-pleased." I told her no way Jesus could have endured his trials and torments if he didn't know that, hold it dearly, and cleave to it always. I told her God the Father said this over Jesus not just for his well-being. No, Jesus came to us so they he might share it, extend it, and help us grasp that we're no less beloved--every one of us--before God than he is.

More than once I had said this to Lise. But this time the coin dropped. The message got through. Last week I asked her permission to share this story with you. And she recalled that moment years ago. She said, whenever she is upset, that is where she goes. She said whenever she feels alienated from others, whenever she's ill, when she sat at her mother's deathbed, this blessing takes her out of her distress and makes her troubles feel conquerable. It boosts her confidence. It not only comforts her in those moments, it also reminds her who she finally is. She said it calms and consoles her when she knows that she has disappointed and fallen short. She called her belovedness before God her most powerful weapon. Sometimes when she prays or just walks, she repeats it to herself as her mantra. Lise told me that being beloved of God is the most basic thing she is.

Could say this to your child? Could you console him with arms bigger than yours when our human consolations fall short? If so, you must first embrace it yourself. Proclaiming this, helping you feel it, reminding you of it is the heart of my calling. Parish ministry isn't easy but that I get to declare this blessing makes it the greatest job in the world. People write off the church and can be very critical of us—we are a bunch of hypocrites, we're not so nice, we fall short of lofty standards we lift up high. But you can't hear this message or receive this blessing anywhere else.

For me, the struggle to get through the day is realizing that the world constantly broadcasts subtly flawed messages that only seem true on the face of things. It's as though the media are transmitters and my head is the radio. My head buzzes with conflicting messages as I turn the dial, filtering among them. You are what you earn. You are what you wear. You are where you live. You are what and who you know. So you had better be this somebody. Or you're *nobody*. Every day, at the same time, God wants to disabuse me of all that, if I only have ears to hear.

I spend days working the dial searching for a signal that I call *Radio God*. Like an underground movement, it broadcasts an alternative message for being human. For finding happiness. For living a true life. For becoming whole. For fulfilling the destiny God intended in creating me. I know that message is out there. I want to attune myself to it. But it gets squelched by taller transmitters, often with bigger money. Yet sometimes the signal breaks through the confusing static. The signal comes in loud and clear. It announces a whole other life than that most of us live most of the time. That is the life I want. For the truth of this life will not disappoint.

Next year on this Sunday I'll invite you to come forward and bless you with water as today I bless your children. It's a service in the UCC Book of Worship. I'll invite you forward to renew your baptism, your belovedness, by way of reaffirming it. My hope is you'll hear the One who speaks above life's static; that the signal will resound clearly and the message get delivered. For you not only deserve to hear the final truth that ultimately defines what it means to be human. You need to remember this truth to live with strength, dignity, and grace. So hear this word and live: You're God's beloved children, with whom God is well-pleased. Considering it is all we need to know, we don't say and hear it nearly enough. Amen.