**Recognizing the Face of Jesus**

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Texts: Isaiah 43:1-7; Matthew 25:31-46

I love weddings. Not all clergy do, but I do. Sure I’ve heard about Bridezillas, but I’ve honestly never experienced one, not in twenty-three years of officiating at weddings. I did encounter a Groomzilla once, but that’s a different story and not one that needs to be in a sermon.

The first wedding I did here at Frame, fourteen years ago, was for Dawn Telfer and Elias Acero. Dawn was a child of this church; at the time of the wedding, her mom, Hedy, was an active member of the congregation. Elias had grown up in Mexico. The wedding was really special—they invited three clergy to participate, including a pastor they had grown to know together, and the Catholic priest from Elias’ home town, and me. It was so much fun. I read most of the service alternately in Spanish and English – I certainly didn’t fool anyone into thinking I spoke Spanish, but it was important to Dawn and Elias, and to me, that both families would feel fully welcomed and part of the service. Some of you were there. Well, in the course of the wedding, when the time came for the exchange of rings, Dawn accidentally placed Elias’ ring on the ring finger of his right hand instead of his left, and as is the case for many of us, Elias’ hands are not exactly the same size. The ring was stuck. It was stuck tightly. And as they stood, quietly fidgeting with the ring, their backs to the congregation and facing me, Elias kept trying to remove the ring, and Dawn kept whispering to him, “Remember, you promised to love me!” Yes, he did. And yes, they do. And yes, Elias did get the ring off and replaced onto the ring finger of the correct hand, and quite possibly many people there never knew what happened.

*Remember, you promised to love me.* These two have lived out their marriage with the same spirit of welcome, joy, and love as they shared in the wedding. They have four children. The eldest is a boy, the next is a girl, the third is a boy. The fourth child was identified as a girl at birth, and was named Lucia Genevieve Acero. Any of us who are parents will recognize that children are who they are—we have some influence, to be sure, but God made them who they are. And when their youngest child was three, he began explaining to his parents that he is a boy, not a girl. Elias and Dawn spoke with experts and other parents and a variety of caring people, including me, and they became determined to accept their child’s identity to be who he understood himself to be. They understand that it will be complicated at times. But they trust him, and they trust God, and they trust their ability to support one another in their very loving and welcoming family. Over time, he chose a new name for himself: Arrow Rex Acero. Arrow is seven years old now, and yesterday I was so very privileged to be part of a worship service recognizing that new name, and celebrating Arrow’s understanding of his own identity, and his family’s embrace of who he is. They truly live with welcome, joy, and love. They were able to see in Arrow the image of God in the boy he understands himself to be.

Friday was Transgender Day of Remembrance. Transgender persons are at particular risk of violence. From October 1, 2019 to September 30, 2020 there were 53 persons who were transgender or gender-non-conforming were killed or died by self-harm(the number is likely higher as police reports don’t always identify gender-non-conformity). The current administration has actively worked to roll back some of the legal protections for trans persons, which only encourages hate crimes and a lack of acceptance.

Each of us is made in the image of God. Jesus, in our gospel story for today, reminds us that we can be very slow to recognize the face of Jesus in one another. We “other” people so easily—see them as fundamentally different than ourselves and we show that in the way we label people: Trumpies, tree-huggers, and Yuppies being three of the gentler labels that people use to make clear that some people are *not like us*: they are deplorable, or unreasonable and anti-business, or uppity and self-absorbed. And of course we all know about other labels…labels I will not mention.

We do it in ways we don’t even notice. We talk about “the poor” as if they are somehow, again, fundamentally different than we are. We think it is reasonable to strip voting rights from felons as if some mistakes warrant losing basic rights of citizenship. How would it be to be forever defined by the worst thing you ever did?

David Haas is a hymn-writer who has written some really beautiful worship music, including the anthem “Blest Are They” and the hymn we will sing after this sermon, “You Are Mine.” Haas has recently been credibly accused of serial sexual abuse, and many institutions are no longer using his music because of that. What he is accused of is awful, and unacceptable. But, I am increasingly uncomfortable with defining someone by the worst thing they’ve ever done. He has amazing gifts, and his music brings beautiful messages about God’s great love for us. If, when we hear it, we remember what Haas is accused of, perhaps it can remind us that no matter what we have done, God loves us.

*Remember, God promised to love us.* The passage from Isaiah was written to a nation in exile, to people who perhaps thought that God had forgotten them, to people whose circumstances did not suggest they were blessed. And yet, God holds them very tenderly in this passage, and whispers to them, “You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you.”

We don’t just exile law-breakers, or people with whom we disagree. We exile parts of ourselves as well. We find parts of ourselves unlikeable, even unacceptable, or worse, shameful. Shame is such a corrosive experience. We may have been shamed by others. And shaming is very powerful stuff.

We are mammals. We are hard-wired for human relationships. We are social animals, tribal animals, herd animals. And, we have an exceptionally long dependent stage as infants and toddlers. We are not like foals or fawns who shortly after birth toddle to our feet and follow our mothers. We can’t even roll over for months. We are utterly dependent on other people. We are biologically dependent upon other people. And so when we get the message, early on, as little children from one of our parents that we are somehow unacceptable, then biologically, it is a life-threatening experience. Our parents, our grandparents, our aunts and uncles, or later… our teachers, and our peers may not use those words. They won’t even necessarily tell us to be ashamed. It could be as mild as being ignored. But when we somehow get the message that we are not fully accepted as who we are, we feel shame, and that shame is biologically life-threatening. We might be exiled from the group. And that experience is so painful, that we exile parts of ourselves as well. Maybe it’s the part of ourselves that was too messy, or spoke too loudly, or cried, or was too enthusiastic. Whatever our experience, all of us have parts of ourselves that have been exiled, and we’ve all developed other parts, coping mechanisms to protect ourselves from the feelings of shame, or exclusion, or hurt that came along too. This is, by the way, at the heart of the work I’ve been doing with Internal Family Systems—helping people to find those parts and heal them by granting themselves the full accepting, compassionate love that God grants all of us. It’s work that can be transformative.

*Remember, God promised to love us.* But despite that love, there may be other ways that we fail to see God’s image in ourselves, that we fail to see the marvelous people full of possibilities that God created us to be. How often have we said about ourselves, “Oh I can’t do that.” Or, “I’m not good at that.” My grandmother said that Gilberts were not good at math, but my Dad chose not to believe that and went on to do post-doctoral work in economics after earning his PhD in Political Science. My Mom believed as a child that she had no talent for art, but then in her thirties took a pottery class and spent the next 52 years of her life as a working artist. I changed my major in college from Political Science, although I had all the course requirements because at my university a PoliSci major required a senior thesis and I didn’t think I could do that. Later, in adulthood, when I had been diagnosed with ADHD, I especially thought I couldn’t do that kind of project—but I was drawn to the Doctor of Ministry in preaching program, and when I did it, I not only wrote a thesis, but I finished it a month early. And doing that impossible thing led me to believe that God had possibilities for me that I hadn’t recognized…and it gave me the hope to try again to lose weight, and it gave me a whole new attitude toward the next third of my life. What possibilities does God have within you that you haven’t recognized or welcomed?

And what about when the parts of ourselves that we are ashamed of don’t feel full of promise—perhaps we can’t see the face of Jesus in our failing memory as we age, perhaps we can’t find the image of God in our anxiety, or depression. But we are still whole persons, children of God, cherished by the creator, made in God’s image, and whatever the parts of us we want to exile, whatever the ways we feel less than, whatever the ways we may “other” ourselves, God wants to welcome us fully into the welcoming acceptance of God’s love, just as we are right now.

How often do we sell ourselves short? How often do we fail to see the possibilities that God has placed within us? How often do we say, “impossible,” instead of saying “I’m possible.” How many trans kids are wondering about who they are, and saying it’s impossible, especially when the adults around them can’t hear their questions, their statements about who they are, and are oblivious to their pain? How painful is it to think that who you are is impossible?

*Remember, God promised to love us.* And Elias promised to love Dawn. And together they promised to love their kids. And that accepting welcoming love made space for Arrow to say, “I’m possible. I’m who I am.” And he could say out loud in yesterday’s Naming Service, “I am a new creation, grateful to embody Christ’s image.”

We all embody Christ’s image. We all have the capacity every day to be a new creation.

*Remember, God promised to love us.* Amen.