

## WHO TELLS YOU WHO YOU ARE?

It has been a crazy few days to say the least. The Capitol was stormed and violated, hyped up marauders filled the halls, over ran the police and security, looted congressional offices, and terrorized elected officials. Democracy unspooled – LIVE – for all the world to see. And even in the immediate aftermath – when the building had been cleared of the rampaging crowd – some still sought to upend a democratic process with baseless objections with no grounding in fact or reality. What a mess.

I don't know about you but I've been on an emotional roller coaster ever since. Angry – so angry, at the individuals involved, the folks who incited them, the blatant racism in how this “protest” was handled by law enforcement compared to what happens when folks take to the streets over yet another senseless killing of an unarmed black person. Disappointed – how did we get to this point? Well, I think we know how we got here. In some ways it really wasn't all that shocking, just the inevitable outcome of elected leaders willing to employ and justify whatever means necessary to stay in power. Sad. Is this who we are as a nation? Yes, sadly, this is who we are and it has been part and parcel of who we are throughout the history of our nation – we just don't like to talk about those chapters. Ashamed. What an embarrassment on so many levels. For a nation who likes to fancy itself as a City on a Hill – a light to the nations, God's chosen – I wanted to just through a bushel over the whole thing. Angry – did I say angry? Really angry – I wanted to go throttle some people. What a bunch of idiots! Lock them all up and throw away the key, including all those elected leaders who encouraged and participated in this farce. Angry – with how relatively easy it was for a group of largely white men to barge past law enforcement, ransack the Capitol and then walk right out without being arrested. That first night, the vast majority of folks who were arrested were picked up for curfew violations. Imagine if that I had been a group of people of any color except white. There's not a doubt in my mind that a lot of folks would have been shot and instead of scraps of “Don't Tread on Me” flags there would have been bodies lining those legislative halls.

There is a fine line between righteous anger and unbridled retribution. As people of faith, how are we to respond to what has happened and negotiate the road ahead?

This morning, on this first Sunday after Epiphany we celebrate the baptism of Jesus. We recall, by way of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus' experience of being baptized by John in the Jordan River, how as he was coming out of the water, he saw the heavens literally “torn apart” and the Spirit descend and a voice – presumably God – affirm, “You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.”

“You are my Son – my child – deeply, unconditionally, loved – with you I am well pleased.” Can you hear those words spoken to you this morning? Can you hear those words spoken to those who rampaged through the Capitol? Because if we can't hear those words spoken to all God's children there is no hope. Now, I don't think for a moment God condones what happened on Wednesday, just like I don't think God condones all of our actions, but the fundamental love of God cannot be conditioned on human response. It is indicative – not imperative. God

proclaims who we are and invites us to grow into that person. The challenge is that it is far too easy to forget who we are.

In *Remember Who You Are: Baptism, a Model for Christian Life*, the author and preacher William Willimon asks

Who first told me? Who first told you? Who first said that you were a wretched offender, a miserable sinner, no good? Was it your parents, when they first shook you and scolded you and told you to behave? Or your teachers, when they told you to go to the bottom of the class? Or your boss, when he asked you to do it over and try to get it right this time? Or your children, who looked at you and judged you to be parentally inadequate? Or did they all tell you? They all told you who you are. You are the over-drinking, over-spending, over-sexed, under-achieving, under-giving, under-loving, worm-like one who is not quite what the Creator has in mind when he thinks of “the image of God.”

But that’s not what scripture proclaims. Here these words from 1 Peter:

Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God’s people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.

Or, as Rev. Jesse Jackson once put it more succinctly:

“I was nobody.  
But now, thank God, I’m *somebody!*”

As I’ve pored over the images of the mob that ran amok through the Capitol it has at times struck as so pathetic. Once they got into the building they had no clue what to do and things quickly devolved into childish antics proudly putting feet up on someone else’s desk, carrying off a podium, strutting around in vain displays. Sadly, that’s not all that happened – the violence was real not feigned, and people were hurt and died, but the perpetrators seem so utterly lost. Who did they think they were? Whose did they think they were? Did they know themselves as beloved children of God?

Who tells you who you are? Your parents, your children, your nation, your job, your friends, your school, your bank account, your President, your Congressperson or Senator? If you allow others to tell you who you are, they will only be too happy to tell you. But that is a dangerous way. Back in high school, every Friday and Saturday night, when you were leaving home to go on a date, were you ever sent off with the admonition, “Don’t forget who you are.” If so, you knew what that meant. It did not mean that you were in danger of forgetting your name or street address. It meant that, alone on a date, in the midst of some party, in the presence of some strangers, you might forget who you were. You might lose sight of the values with which you had been raised, answer to some alien names, engage in some unaccustomed behavior.

It is difficult at times, amidst the conflicting claims and confusion of names, to remember who we are. We are forever answering to some false name, forever misunderstanding who we are and by whom we are named. It is easy to forget. United Methodist pastor Barbara Sholis puts it this way:

Inevitably, life has a way of “wringing us out,” and we forget that God dwells in and among us. We forget our “beloved” identity. Laurence Hull Stookey labels our forgetfulness “spiritual amnesia” but adds that baptism is what counters our amnesia. The touch of water upon our lives helps us recall our place in the biblical story, and reminds us that God’s creative force is still birthing us, claiming us, renewing us.

The church is there to remind you, to remind one another, that someone greater than us has named us and claimed us and seeks us and loves us with only one good reason in mind - so that God might love us for all eternity. The hymn we will sing later this morning contains the line: “Child of God your loving Parent, learn to know whose child you are.” That’s the life-long journey we are all on – baptized or not – learning to truly know who and whose we are.

As I look at the road ahead for our nation, yes, there will need to be justice. We cannot go on like this excusing some folks for their actions while heavily persecuting others for peacefully speaking out in the name of racial justice. We cannot continue to live enmeshed in lies, half-truths, and untruths. Those who continue to do so need to be held to account. Justice must be served. But we dare not become – devolve – into that which we criticize. For we if we lose track of God’s declaration of belovedness to all God’s children then who are we? If we become those who objectify and devalue others – not simply their views but who they are as human beings then we are really no different than that mob in the Capitol on Wed.

A few moments ago we blessed some water together. In another moment, as Tom plays some music, I invite you engage engage this water in an exercise of remembering who and whose you are. Whether or not you are baptized you can participate in this exercise. This is not some sort of remote baptism but an act of remembering. First, remembering who you are: dip your hand in the water and touch your forehead as you say your name, your full name, out loud. Remember your family of origin, your circle of friends, your self-identity, God’s child. Second – whose you are: dip your hand in the water a second time and again touch your forehead. Remember whose you are: the triune God’s, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, God, Jesus, Spirit

Created, called, claimed – Beloved.

AMEN.