
The Other Jesus

Matthew 17:1-9

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on March 2, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

Jesus is other. He is not one of us. He is not our best friend, our BFF, our bosom buddy, plopped down in our living room on a sofa, drinking a cold one or two with us, while we watch Duke defeat Syracuse and see their coach lose his mind on the basketball court (though that was pretty sweet). This may surprise you but Jesus was not praying for Duke or Syracuse to win. He didn't go to a cross for NCAA basketball championships. He had other things on his mind and on his face.

On a mountain, he's transfigured before the inner circle of disciples (Peter, James, and John) "and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white." If they didn't realize then that Jesus was other, Moses and Elijah show up and talk with him through a Holy Spirit Skype. You would think the disciples would understand what was happening because it's not everyday the representatives of the Law and the Prophets show up with Jesus to form a holy triumvirate. But Peter doesn't really seem to get it. Though he has this vision, he has limited vision. He volunteers to make three dwellings—one for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. One could read this as a sign of hospitality but one may also read it as signifying a form of hostility. Peter not only wants to be in the presence of Jesus and the others, but he wants to control what they live in as if they can be enclosed. I'll make you a dwelling. I'll domesticate Jesus as if Jesus is one of us, like us, desiring a fine home, a companion, and at least one dog, hopefully like my buddy, Randolph. Peter, like us, becomes so used to a domesticated Jesus that we think we can make the parameters of his dwelling when in fact he's really our spiritual home. Jesus will not be confined by our human limitations and constructs.

He is not one of us. He is other. He's not made in our image or denominational heritage, race, gender, or class. We may want Jesus to be a blue devil but Jesus is not a shadow of ourselves in the reflection of our light. We are called to reflect his transfiguration glory and light.

And just when we thought we understood Jesus because we saw him as one of us, just when we think we have him under control, just when he's become so cool and safe that we can wear him on a bracelet or necklace, just when we've made him into our image, he changes his appearance and is transfigured to make us know that he is God and not our traditions or theologies or even chapel buildings. Jesus will not be idolized or made into an idol because he is a living, holy and wholly other God. Just when we think we know what he looks like and how he always acts, his appearance changes and he becomes other because he wants us to change our way of thinking about him and that which is other.

During the much-heated era of what was called "the worship wars" within the church, people argued about what type of music should be used in worship—traditional or contemporary; pipe organ or a band with guitars; hymns or praise songs. Some of you may have scars from that battle! I believe we've moved beyond this battleground into a more mature time but as it relates to worship, writer Annie Dillard reminds us that we are like "children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning." Not the most generous perspective on humans at worship and the truth is that we haven't always been generous toward each other, especially during these past worship wars. I had a former seminary professor, who shall go unnamed; he called praise songs, 7/11 songs—they had 7 words that were repeated 11 times. He claimed they were so simple that his dog could sing them. One may agree with his liturgical taste but at the same time just because he didn't like it didn't mean Jesus wasn't pleased with it or glorified by it. That musical genre was other thus he felt that he could denigrate it and by doing so, implicitly dismiss the worship life of thousands of Christians in this country and the world. Christian worship was in his cultural and theological image and anything outside of his intellectual

dwelling was not deemed worthy. Underneath this liturgical elitism was either an arrogance or fear that God may move and act in ways we would never approve. God is not made in our image.

Jesus is transfigured before the disciples to show that otherness and change and difference are really okay. It is a reminder that no one tradition, culture, or community has a monopoly on Christ, Christian identity and practice. Usually, we hear about things or places or people being *othered* but here Jesus others himself to demonstrate that he will not be entombed and trapped in our myopic thinking. He is not chiseled into theological limestone or dogma because he is free and on the loose in the world and in our lives, saying and doing things we may consider to be unsophisticated and inappropriate for a God. And look at what Jesus does that is considered the folly of the gospel—he dies on a cross; this is unacceptable for a Messiah. Jesus is not one of us. He is other. He is not attached to our umbilical cord. We did not give birth to him; he wants to be born in us. And like any birth, it involves pain.

Because he is other, the inevitable happens and is what happens to the other many times. His transfiguration occurs in the context of the prediction of his suffering and death. His gaze is turned toward Jerusalem, the place of his death, reminding us that he didn't come to make us successful. He came to save us by a cross and to encourage us to join him in suffering and death. As I've seen on twitter and heard this week in a post-lecture Q&A, "the only place success comes before work is in the dictionary." Jesus redefines success through his cruciform work of redemption. This is not the Jesus the disciples bargained for; he is an-other Jesus whose trajectory of success is to die, not to live in a confining dwelling we make. Jesus faces his other, Death itself, head on.

His end shouldn't surprise us because when someone is other, all kinds of horrific things can happen. The other can easily be written out of the pages of humanity because they play loud music in their SUV or wear a hoodie. Their hair, their clothes, their religion, their race, their gender, their sexual orientation is different, therefore we may demonize them because we deem them other than ourselves and count them as subhuman, even bully them into suicide, an unnecessary crucifixion just because they are not made in our selfsame image or cannot be housed in our dwelling. "Violence stems from the denial of Otherness" (Gideon Ofrat). French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, teaches that any tradition, system, person, or concept that closes off the possibility of the other is poison and may lead to the death of the other. They will know we are Christians by our love not by how much others believe what we do or act like we do.

Yet we can't help but worship a Jesus that we think looks like us. We have a white Jesus and a black Jesus, a Mexican immigrant Jesus, a Chinese Jesus, a muscular Jesus with a six-pack, a laughing Jesus, a Rasta Jesus, a mini-me Jesus. We make him into our image but the transfiguration reveals that Jesus is not only other but he refuses to be made into an idol that can be controlled and easily disregarded and discarded. You can't ignore his sunshiny face and dazzling clothes. But just in case, there's no way to miss the voice that speaks out of the bright cloud and sets the record straight about who Jesus is. There's still something within us that wants to claim full knowledge of Jesus but we can't fully know. We only see through a glass dimly because he is other, not the blond haired blue eyed Jesus on the church fan or the one depicted in our Sunday school material or even the middle eastern Jewish man with a beard from the BBC special about Jesus. We must admit that as other, Jesus may not be what we think and perhaps not what we want many times because what we really want is a Jesus who fits into our dwelling and our plans.

But his otherness calls us to spiritual openness in seeing difference dazzle on the face of God. Difference as the light of God. Not selfsameness but otherness as the glory of God on the earth when it has been touched by transfiguration. But this transfiguration strikes terror in the hearts of the disciples. They are overcome by fear once they hear "this is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" It's as if they can't believe this transfigured person is really Jesus, the Messiah, because this was not the Jesus they signed up to follow. If they couldn't believe with their own eyes, now they couldn't believe with their own ears. Fear brings them to their knees because often we fear what we don't understand or what

we've never experienced because it was not our tradition or custom or *our* Jesus. Maybe we're so used to a fossilized and impotent Jesus that is on display in a medieval museum only to be viewed and not obeyed, and definitely not to be followed to a cross. This other Jesus scares us because he's not the one we grew up with or heard about. This other Jesus causes our "citadels of certainties" to become "sand castles" (James Olthius). Thus, anything different, anything other, makes us afraid.

I'm currently teaching a class on Howard Thurman, former dean of the chapels at Howard and Boston Universities. *Life* magazine rated him as one of the most important religious leaders in the United States in 1953. In his 1949 classic book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, he says that people are "hounded by day and harrowed by night because of some fear." Fear, he writes, is a "persistent hound of hell." Let's be real. Happiness was not listed as an essential trademark of any disciple. Ironically, fear should be noted as a trait on a disciple's resume. The disciples don't teem with confidence in Matthew. When a windstorm arose on the sea and the boat was being swamped by waves, Jesus asks them, "Why are you afraid?" (Matt 8:26) When Jesus walks on water, the disciples are terrified and think he's a ghost and cry out in fear (Matt 14:26). Peter starts walking on the water too but when he became frightened he begins to sink (Matt 14:30). Fear can drown you if all you have known is a Jesus who is made in your image. The other Jesus, the transfigured one, can be spooky because we always thought he was one of us, just a long-time member in our neighborhood church.

But this mountaintop experience reveals that Jesus is other and may do some things that we would never approve and be someone we never really knew because we only knew the one in our dwelling. This Jesus may be alien to us because he's not even an orthodox God. So we fear the other, the unknown, that which is not us, on the other side of the border, the other side of a political issue. The other is viewed as a potential danger. We fear because we don't trust God enough that even when Jesus changes before our eyes and becomes other, we are afraid. We're afraid that Jesus' metamorphism may actually tell us how uncomfortable we are with the other, ourselves and with change. So uncomfortable that even when God acts in ways we've never experienced we believe it can't possibly be God because it hasn't happened in our existential universe. We construct a wall of fear and call names like 'illegal,' 'unorthodox,' or 'heretic.' Other.

Despite the name-calling and fear, the transfigured Jesus reveals that the other does not have to be scary but should be engaged and desires to be known. The other can bring comfort and calm if you get close enough. Here, it is Jesus, who is other, who actually reaches out to the disciples and touches them and tells them not to be afraid. The transfiguration rejects a religion of fear and the touch of transfiguration may actually change us as well by recognizing that the other does not need to be feared but represents unforeseeable possibilities and unexpected gifts. The other is not always a foe but can be a friend and what the transfiguration reveals is that it may even be the Christ.

"Let the other come!" (Derrida) Embrace difference. Embrace the other, whatever or whomever it may be because it is in the "drama of embrace" (Miroslav Volf) that you will experience the luminous presence of God.