

It could be said that the story of the church is a story of who's who. Every Sunday, we step back into a story that aims to remind us of who we are, and of who we are not. This story is not new. It's the same story the church has been trying to tell for years. It's the story Martin Luther tried to tell in 1517 when he set in motion a revolution in the Roman Catholic Church. Among Luther's many complaints against his beloved Catholic church at that time was that priests were taking indulgences—charging people money—in order to be given the forgiveness of sins. Either forgiveness is free or it isn't forgiveness, said Luther. From where Luther sat, it looked like the priest had confused himself with God.

Some 20 years later, the Dutch reformer John Calvin, wrote his theological anthology, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. His opening line was to say, “Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.” Knowing who we are and knowing who God is. Keep it straight, Calvin insisted, because in this is the fullness of wisdom. That's a hard thing to do, though, I'll give us that. Calvin goes on to say that we and God are connected by many ties, making it very difficult to determine who came first. It's a bit like the chicken and the egg. Who's who?

The earliest pages of Genesis record that in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void. There was nothing else there. Until *God* said, “Let there be light.” And there was light and there was darkness, and we're told, *God called* the light Day, and the darkness *God called* night. There's no one else around. It's the beginning and God is calling all the shots. So it went also with the sea and skies and with the stars and moons and all the animals, that God said and God called and God said and God called. Except when it comes to the creation of human beings. On the day God decides to make human beings God says, “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness.” It's not clear who God might have been talking to when God said, let *us* do this part together. What is clear, though, is that even in the beginning God was not alone. What's also clear is that while God must have been happy to handle the creation of the oak

tree and the blue whale and the Grand Canyon on God's own, when it came to making you and me, God decided it was a job worth sharing. Maybe that's because God found a special joy in making us, a joy that couldn't be found even in getting to hang the Little Dipper in the sky. Or maybe it's that God was concerned not to make us too much like one thing. If God had made any one of us all on God's own, what would there be to keep God from saying later on, this one is my favorite. And what would there be even now from keeping us from saying, I am God's favorite. The power to create is the power to love or to hate, the power to choose or to reject. We can have favorite coffee mugs. We can have favorite restaurants or television programs, but let us not play favorites with one another.

So, God makes us not in God's image alone but in *our* image, that we might not forget that in coming from God we come from one another. We are not God and yet—look the whole world over—and we won't catch a better view of God than the one we'll get by looking at one another. That's a hard thing to do, though, I'll give us that. It's a hard thing to do because we are hardly ever the best imitators of God for one another, let alone for ourselves. In my estimation, this has to be why I wake up some days, even on Sundays (I'll admit it) and find myself thinking that today I'd rather go for a hike or take a drive by myself or just stay home and read a good book, because seeing the love and mercy of God in the people around us can be really, really hard.

Yesterday afternoon I was out in my backyard talking with my next-door neighbor, John. We've lived next door to John and his wife Jean for about 3 years now and John and I see each other almost every day when our two dogs get together to play. John is retired and considerably older than me, and I wouldn't say that we necessarily have a lot in common, though I can say we've become friends. They have a key to our house and watch over things whenever we go away and we do the same for them. Anyway, yesterday, while standing around in the backyard John looked at me and said, "David, I just want you to know, I'm really glad to know you." It was such a kind and generous thing to say. I honestly don't recall what we were talking about when he said it, but of course I said to him in return, "Thanks John, I'm really glad to know you."

If you can't tell, I'm still thinking about the comment. It kind of hit me from out of left field. I think it's because it's the kind of thing we just don't hear said much anymore. Sadly, John's comment made me realize that while I know a lot about a lot of people, there

aren't many people I know anymore. It may be our 24-hour news cycle that has given us instant access to so much so quickly that I no longer have time anymore to think about who I want to get to know. With just the click of a button on my tiny computer screen, I can now be transported to a mass shooting in California, to a mass bombing in Mosul, to breaking news about how the First Lady didn't accompany the President to the State of the Union in Washington, and in between all this I can stop off to hear what any number of news stations and late night talk show hosts have to say about it all. The truth is, a 24-hour news cycle doesn't necessarily give us more access to our world and to one another, only more access to opinions about our world and one another.

I thought about this and had read for us Mark's gospel, a story about Jesus at the home of Simon and Andrew, and word gets out that he is there and everyone in town who is sick or possessed by a demon comes knocking on the door, looking for Jesus to cure them. I don't know if you've ever met someone who was possessed of something. They can seem like they're not fully awake to where they are. They walk around like they're lost in this world, like they've actually come from someplace else. Mark's word for the possessed is lunatic, which comes from the word "luna," which in English gets translated, moon. They come in the evening, at sunset, Mark notes, because anyone who's ever been haunted by anything knows, this is how it works. Everyone else has gone to bed, but the lunatic is still up, kept awake by their demons. You can't sleep, you can't think straight, all you can do is stare out the window at the moon. In another part of Mark's gospel we read a story about a lunatic who was possessed by so many demons that he earned himself the nickname, Legion. Not knowing what to do with Legion and afraid he might be a danger to society, one day the town's people got together and decided Legion had to go. They chained him up in a cave on the far side of the sea, in a place no one would ever go, in a place no one would ever want to go. And that's where they left him.

Those who have ever worked with the demonized know that sometimes containment is necessary, though it's rarely helpful. Sometimes being able to receive a diagnosis is helpful. To struggle with a mental illness your whole life and then one day to have a doctor or a psychiatrist or counselor tell you, this is what it is, and, this is what we can do, can be incredibly freeing. It can also be stigmatizing, cause to shut ourselves and one another away. Throughout his life and ministry, Jesus was never afraid to diagnose, to

call our demons by name, to tell the crowds of people who came knocking on his door, this is who you are, this is your story, now go out and proudly tell it to the world, and don't leave any parts out.

For Jesus, knowing your demons is only part of it, though. The other part is the part we hear in Mark's gospel and echoed in the ancient words of Isaiah, that Jesus was not afraid to know his demons because Jesus was not afraid to let his demons know him.

When I was in seminary in New Jersey I worked a summer interning up here in Boston at a little church in the projects of Southie. Through a variety of grants and a partnership with the Massachusetts Department of Education, the church spent its entire summer hosting a day camp for the kids who lived in the neighborhoods around the church. My job that summer, for 8 weeks, was to be the counselor to the 4-year-olds. In my group that summer was a boy named Emmanuel. Emmanuel came to the church every morning at 8 for breakfast and stayed through lunch. He was a sweet kid, but a tough kid. Already he had been passed around between family members, but mostly he lived with his grandmother, his mother's mother. On the day he was born his mother didn't name him. I don't know if she didn't name him because she didn't want him or because she couldn't keep him, but for the first week of his life, Emmanuel didn't have a name. Two days later, she left the hospital without him and on the day he was going to be released to the state, his grandmother showed up to claim him and she gave him the name Emmanuel. Since the age of 3 he had been seeing a counselor to help him manage what had been diagnosed as an anger problem. When things didn't go his way, Emmanuel would start to lash out. He would kick and punch whatever or whoever was close by.

That summer, I remember many times when I'd have to put my arms around Emmanuel and wrap my legs around his, like I was holding him in a strait jacket. He'd fight and fight to get loose and eventually he'd calm down so that I was no longer containing him but hugging him. He was a tough kid, crazy, possessed at times. Even crazier, perhaps, was that when Emmanuel would get going, one of the things that could calm him down was to ask him to tell you his name, and he'd say, through clenched teeth, "My name is Emmanuel. It means God is with me." His grandmother taught him that. On the day she came to spring him from the hospital and she gave him that name, she told him, your name means God is with you. She must have been telling him that his whole 4 years.

If ever there was an antidote to the 24-hour news cycle—to the talking heads telling us who is out there in the world and why we should be afraid to go out there and meet them—the antidote has got to be coming to church. Coming through the door, sitting down in the pew, hearing all the people say about you, “Your name is... It means God is with you.” It’s enough to make the demons run for cover. Amen.