

## **“That Which is Within You”**

Matthew 17:1-8; The Gospel of Thomas, Saying 70

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By Rev. Don Ludwig, February 19, 2023

### **A Man Called Otto**

This past week, due to my inability to get inspired in writing this sermon, I decided to break away and go see the movie that I have heard so much about: *A Man called Otto*. The movie was preceded by a Swedish movie in 2015 and derived from a book by *Fredrik Backman, A Man Called Ove*. I must say that it was certainly the best movie and storyline I have seen in years. The characters in the movie were riveting and relevant. I caught myself laughing literally out loud at times, and on several thematic moments shedding tears. It was both emotional and provocative.

Otto, played by Tom Hanks is a grumpy old man who does not like people—period. He goes to extremes just to avoid having to interact with them, and what little interaction he does have with those he comes in contact with he calls, “idiots.” Despite Otto’s short temperament and lack of social grace, the neighbors tend to look the other way and still interact with him from time to time, even calling on him for help on occasion.

Take for example, Otto’s new neighbors, Marisol and Tommy. They have just moved across the street and like good neighbors, they walk over and introduce themselves to Otto. Otto says his quick hello and shuts the door. Marisol, in her mind, knows there’s more to Otto than meets the eye and is determined to make him feel cared for. The entire movie is about this community of neighbors who are completely different from one another and watching them slowly discover commonality and interdependence.

### **The Transfiguration**

Today is transfiguration Sunday in the church. This so-called “transfiguration” is about three years into a three and a half year ministry. This is after months and years that the disciples had been following Jesus, they had seen his miracles, they had done miracles in His name. They knew something palpably and objectively about the power and the reality of who Jesus was, and yet, when He began to talk about dying it was staggering to the disciples and they began to wonder if He was really the Messiah. So Jesus took three, Peter, James and John, into a high mountain away from the other apostles.

What happened on the mountain appears to be a dramatic awakening. A vision, a reckoning, a transformation, a mountain-top experience. We don’t know much of the details and how much

of those details are figurative but we know that the disciples were transformed as a result. They were suddenly clued into the deeper meaning and value of who Jesus was.

### **Life is ALWAYS worth living because YOU have VALUE**

It seems to me that the messages of the movie *A man called Otto* and the experience of the disciples on the mountain-top coincide. First, life is ALWAYS worth living because YOU are Valued. In the movie, Otto becomes dangerously close to committing suicide four times. He believes he is worthless, his work demoted him, his neighborhood is changing and most of all, his beloved wife had died. He felt that when she had died, so did his value on earth. The disciples felt that if Jesus died, their cause would be over. But both the disciples and Otto come to learn that their value does not depend on others—their value is inside of them. Sure, other people in our lives can help us see the value in our lives, like Otto's wife did for him, she was the bright light that helped him to see his value, like Kathy is for me—but ultimately that value must come from within.

In our busy lives focused on our To DO lists, in our culture that determines our worth by how much we do, in our political climate that gives more credence to deepening our divisions and coming up with the next headline, in our relationships that focus on appearance rather than depth, we so often forget that our most important value is just being, in just finding our center.

This is the core of most religious traditions—center yourself and know that you are valued. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel describes it this way in his book titled *The Shabbat*: *“There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.”*

We are valuable and life is always worth living. Otto learned that he was loved by the community and a vibrant part of it—his presence was deeply felt and would be felt long after he was gone. He discovered that he had value, even as an old curmudgeon. The disciples learned that too.

### **Everyone, Everywhere Matters**

The second lesson we can learn from transfiguration and the movie *A Man Called Otto* is that we are called to embrace our differences. The disciples were certainly a motley crew of marginalized individuals who Jesus befriended and trusted. In the movie we are introduced to a lovely middle-aged man who is always exercising—always walking through the neighborhood with his arms working as much as his legs (he was a hoot!). We also see a good-hearted woman named Marisol. She is a Mexican immigrant with two almost three children and an idiot husband (according to Otto)—she doesn't speak English very well and is just learning how to drive but she sees something special in that crusty old neighbor, Otto.

I love how her character flips the script. Isn't that what Jesus was doing on that mountain with his disciples, flipping the script? When they are worried about Jesus dying, he takes them up to the mountain and shows them the greater purpose of their lives and how their story was connected to the prophets Moses and Elijah and now Jesus. Marisol flips the script too. In our world, we would see Marisol on the margins of society. Yet, she is a dominant force of love—a force of nature throughout the movie. She knows who she is. Otto recognizes that and Marisol becomes the only one who he never calls an “idiot”.

Even another character in the movie is a young trans man who is struggling with his gender identity. He is eventually kicked out of his home because of this and Otto takes him in. This grumpy old man is the one who looks past the stereotypical prejudices that this man faced and accepted him without reservation.

So often, we are mired in our daily activities that we unknowingly perpetuate stereotypes that only serve to marginalize. We see it happening all around us where we think that someone is LESS THAN because they are DIFFERENT FROM! // When I first bought my Prius back in 2009, I started to notice all other Priuses on the road—I would compare them with my own. Did you know that black Priuses are the best looking cars out there? // That is called selective awareness. We all have it. We see what we want to see. We see what we expect to see or what we have been socialized to see. And our values are shaped by what we see—and the meanings we give to what we see—EVERY / DAY. And we so often make our judgements based on first appearance—and subsequently miss out on the deeper meaning and stories of those around us.

Jesus and Otto remind us that first appearances and selective awareness are shallow. The trans man, the migrant family, the bi-racial couple, the grumpy old man (or woman), the disciples—all different. We are called to rise above the pettiness of fear and otherness and be transformed into people who know that EVERYONE, EVERYWHERE matters! As Jose Saramago in his book entitled *Blindness* so distinctively describes: “*Inside us there is something that has no name, that something is what we are.*”

### **It takes a VILLAGE**

Finally, the third lesson we can learn from the transfiguration and the movie *A Man Called Otto* is that it takes a VILLAGE. It takes a village. We are called to carry each other in times of struggle. That was Jesus' message to the disciples on the mountaintop. “Do not be afraid. Do not give up on yourselves! You got this even when I'm gone. You have each other.”

There is a song that we often sing and Kenn will play as a postlude today called “*Down to the River to Pray*”. The song is beautiful to be sure. It is more beautiful and meaningful when you understand its story—an African-American spiritual, composed by an African-American slave.

When the slaves escaped, they would walk in the river together because the water would cover their scent from the bounty-hunters' dogs. The phrase "starry crown" refers to navigating their escape by the stars. Most importantly, they had each other.

In the movie, it became clear that the community needed Otto. But it also became clear that Otto needed them as well. In the end, Otto and his neighbors came together in a tear-jerking magical way to make a difference. They were able to help their friends stay in their home in the face of mounting pressure from the Bank and other social institutions. They found a way to live together and overcome barriers.

It takes a village. Steven, our choir director, shared with me this week the following African American witness who found strength in others: *"In slavery times, my master whipped me terribly, especially when he knew I was praying. He was determined to whip the Spirit out of me, but he never could, for the more he whipped me, the more the Spirit made me happy to be."*

### **Bring Forth What is Within You**

Friends, we are called to bring forth that which is within us. The movie "A Man Called Otto" opened my eyes to the concerns that older people face—loneliness, despair, physical and emotional pain, loss and feelings of rejection—and that has given me reason to be more understanding of what my neighbor may be experiencing. This movie made me ponder some of my choices as a Christian. Who have I ignored? Who have I forgotten? Where do I lack compassion?

Wherever you find yourself this morning, if you want greater meaning and purpose, if you want to truly find that which is within you—that substance with no name, if you want to find value in your own life, remember this: Life is ALWAYS worth living because YOU HAVE VALUE. Remember: EVERYONE, EVERYWHERE, matters. And remember: It takes a VILLAGE!

**A-men.**