

**First United Methodist Church  
618 Eighth Street  
Columbus, Indiana 47201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles  
May 11, 2025**

**“A Family Resemblance”  
Text: John 13:31-35**

A child asked his mother, “how were human beings created.” His very patient mom said, “The first human beings were named Adam and Eve and they lived in a garden. And all human beings are related to them.” The child was content with this answer, but just in case he decided to ask his father as well.

“Dad, how were human beings created?” His dad replied, “We were once all monkeys and over many thousands of years, we evolved into human beings like we are now.”

The child went back to his mother and said, “You lied to me! Dad said human beings evolved from monkeys.” Still very patient, his mother assured him that she had not lied. She simply said, “Your dad was talking about his side of the family.”

I could have told that joke in several different ways but given that it is Mother’s day, telling it with the father’s side of the family as the butt of the joke is one small gift to the mother’s here today.

The truth is, when a baby is born, it is interesting how we often try to position their physical characteristics into the family. She has her mother’s eyes, her father’s nose, grandma’s dimple...all those ways in which we show those connections. When my son was quite young, we were out running errands and a stranger saw us together and commented that my son had my smile. Now, my children came into my life through the gift of adoption. And my son is African-American. But when this stranger said this, I looked at him and replied, “I agree!”

Desmond and I laughed about that throughout the rest of the day together. And the honest truth is that it made me proud to think that there would be any resemblance between the two of us. I can’t help but think that although the physical appearances might be different, our time together would lead people to see that we belong together.

Sadly, however, a lot of times when we look in the mirror, when we give ourselves an honest reflection, what we see are not those positive connections. We see the faults. We might even see things that no one else even notices, but when cause us to feel bad about ourselves.

A few years ago there was a study using a professional sketch artist. Women came and sat behind a screen so that the artist could not see them. The artist then asked the women to describe themselves. Tell me about your nose. How would you describe your hair, your eyes, your

mouth. Without the ability to see the subjects, the sketch artist drew each of the women based upon their own self-description.

The study was repeated with the same sketch artist, but this time another person was describing the women. And based upon the descriptions, the artist drew what they heard. After this, the two sketches were placed alongside one another and the women were able to see what had been drawn.

The results were astounding. The women described themselves in less-flattering ways. They were quick to point out their perceived faults and flaws, which others might not have noticed. A few of the women commented on the picture drawn based upon their self-description saying that they looked unfriendly, not the kind of person they would want to hang out with. The other image, as they had been described by someone else, looked kinder and friendlier.

It wasn't a scientific study, but I think it points out something very prevalent in our society. And I believe it is true of both men and women, of people of all ages. We are bombarded with images of youthful, thin, clear-skinned, athletic people. Such images create a perception of how people should look. When we compare ourselves to those air-brushed images, is it any surprise that our bodies don't measure up?

So I want to pause to ask an important question. What do you see when you look in the mirror? And by that I'm not only asking about the physical appearance. What do you see when you look at yourself? Who is that person you see when you look in the mirror? Is it someone you like? Someone you respect? Someone you love?

On March 8, 1958, Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, left the Gethsemani monastery to run an errand in Louisville. There was nothing particularly momentous about the day or what was going on around him. But while standing there on the corner of what was then, Fourth and Walnut Streets, he had a moment of epiphany. There were people coming and going, heading to work and to meetings, giving only a passing glance to this monk who was standing there. But he experienced a vision that he describes this way:

"I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another, even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness....

"And if only everyone could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around and shining like the sun!" What a powerful moment. Merton looked upon all those people and felt a connection to them and saw beauty shining from within each of them.

Imagine looking upon the people and wanting to say to them, "you are beautiful!" To look upon folks who might not have good self-images and recognize a radiance about them.

I think this was a message Jesus tried to convey over and over again to those around him. And maybe he did that because they, like us, could hear it moment and forget it in the next. They needed to be reminded again and again.

Today's reading is a part of a broader collection of teachings of Jesus just before his crucifixion. This section of John's gospel is sometimes called "The Farewell Discourse." It contains those last words Jesus wanted to share with his friends. This is one last chance to say to them the important things he wants to share.

And the most important of all those statements is the reminder that they are loved. Imperfect though they are, they are loved. For all the ways they might view themselves, Jesus wants them to see what he sees. He sees goodness. He sees beauty. And when he spoke those words, he wasn't just talking to those handful of disciples. He was looking down through history. Looking at you and me and all those around us saying, "You are loved."

But he didn't end there. He added another important line. Looking at those beloved disciples, then and now, Jesus said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Interesting that this is how we will be known.

Jesus didn't say, "they will know you are Christians if you believe the right things about baptism." "They will know you are a disciple if you can recite the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm from memory." He didn't say, "You will be identified as my disciple if you have perfect attendance at church." While those things might be good practices, they are not the distinguishing factors in our faith. By this, they will know that you are my disciple, if you have love for one another. It is how we relate to one another that will signify our true faithfulness.

Jesus had already illustrated this with a story we know well to this day. A man was beaten and robbed and left stranded on the side of the road. Not long thereafter a priest comes by. The people listening to this parable would have had an expectation that the priest would do something to help this man. After all, he is a recognized holy person. This is what one would expect to happen. But the priest walked on by without doing anything.

And it is interesting that in the thousands of years that have followed, we have been many attempts to explain this priest's apathy. If he touched this man he would be considered unclean. Maybe he was afraid for his own life; this might have been an ambush. So many excuses and rationales we have attached to this story to make sense of the priest's inactivity.

But not to worry, there is another man coming down the road. He is a Levite, also a holy man of that time. And the listeners would have presumed that this man will stop to help. That is what good people do and the Levite was certainly that kind of person. I sometimes wonder whether Jesus paused in this portion of the story to allow that expectation to set in. I can imagine him saying, "But along came a Levite" and then saying nothing for over a minute. He looked around at the crowd, relaced his sandals, generally paused in the story to allow people's minds to race to the imagined conclusion. And only then did he say, "But he walked on by as well without helping."

But again, hope is restored. There is another traveler coming down the path. And the people are hopeful that in the familiar form of storytelling, the third person is always the one who brings a solution. And then Jesus says, "But he was a Samaritan." Another long pause while the people looked at one another and thought, "This story is not going to end well." This must be a story about a man dying on the roadside. Once again, their minds have already filled in the blanks of what is likely to happen next.

And when Jesus resumes he says, "The Samaritan comforted the hurting man, put him on his donkey, gave him safe passage to a place where he could heal and recover." He didn't just drop him at the door and say to the innkeeper, "This man is hurting and he appears to be one of your people, make sure you help him." No, the Samaritan provides the resources to care for this man and says to the innkeeper, if his needs exceed what I have provided, let me know and I will fulfill that need. He responded with a generous kindness and compassion for one who was hurting.

And then Jesus asked the question, "Which one of these people treated this man like a neighbor?" It was an easy answer. The one who showed compassion and mercy. And Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."

It is such a consistent message and one that Jesus repeated in parables, in teachings and in his actions. He encouraged us to love one another. And by that love, this is how people will know who we are. This is how our faith will be made evident.

In the book *Sacramental Cocoa*, there is a story about a social worker who wanted to stop by the hospital to visit a client who had just had surgery. The gentleman was old and lived alone and she knew no one would be coming to visit him. The only difficulty was that she had just picked up her daughter from elementary school. If she drove home, she wouldn't likely feel like going back out to visit this man. She said to her daughter that they were going to make a quick stop, just a few minutes.

Mother and daughter found out the man's room number and went up the elevator to see him. The man was recovering, but still a bit groggy. They had a brief but pleasant conversation and the woman promised that she would come back again soon to check on him.

A few days later she went to see him at his home. The surgery had gone well and the man was recuperating well. They again had a pleasant visit and as she was preparing to leave, the man said, "I remember when you came to visit me in the hospital." The woman nodded as the man continued. He said, "I know this will sound strange, but when you were there I could have sworn that there was an angel with you." The woman tried to explain that this had been her daughter, but the man was adamant that it was an angel. He said she smiled at him and when she did he knew he was going to get better.

I'm sure the man was speaking about the woman's daughter, but I can't dismiss the possibility that what he saw was an angel. Because when we love one another, the image that is projected is a holy one. When we share that love with those around us, even in very simple and seemingly minor ways, something of God's light and love shines through us. May that love find a home in our hearts and radiate throughout the whole world.