

EPIPHANY II, YEAR A

15 January 2023

John 1:29-42/ Isaiah 49:1-7

Where does your identity come from? If I were to ask you to identify yourself, what would you say? Maybe you would start by sharing your first name. You are probably quite tired of hearing me talk about, but I'll say again that our names have meaning. A friend of mine from Zambia told me that in her culture, a baby's name is regarded as the first blessings spoken over them. Perhaps you would continue to self-identify by stating your surname. For most of us, our last name says something about our family connections; our heritage; the roots that we stem from. Some of us would include our relationships in a description about who we are (for example, I'm Aidan's wife; I'm William, Bennett, and Peter's mom, etc.). It would be usual in our culture to say what you do: I'm a parent, I'm a healthcare professional, I'm recently retired, I'm a Warden, and so on. Is our identity found in the sum of these things?

In many ways our identity is not something that we created, but is rather something that is given, for better or worse.

Before I started my lay ministry in the Regent Park community in Toronto, I first served in a ministry called the Street Youth Van. This was an outreach to young people who were living on or near the streets. Over months and years of sharing meals with these individuals, I learned that they are quite a close community. Moreover, when people would tell me who they were, I learned that several of the youth had abandoned their given names for adopted names. They call these their 'street names'. Now some of these street names, I cannot share with you from the pulpit, or even in my written notes, but these are a few 'PG-rated' examples: Bubbles, Shorty, Boo, Giggles. Although these names may sound funny or lighthearted to us, the meaning behind them was deep. For instance, as I got to know Bubbles, I learned that he had been permanently injured from being shaken as a baby. He described his injury as bubbles in his brain. Giggles was a serious girl, but was called by this name because she laughed a lot when she was intoxicated. As their stories were told, I came to understand that their adopted names were meant to communicate something of themselves.

My greatest understanding of this came when I was given a street name by this community, which I wore as a badge of honor. One day a couple of youth came on the van and told me that they had decided to call me 'Cinderella'. I asked if this was because I was there to clean up after them. One of the girls replied, "No. It's because you came from a life of privilege, but something in your family broke that caused you to be here cleaning up after us." This was true. They had gotten to know me, so had given me this name (that I'll answer to, by the way!).

Your being here this morning is born out of our identity, regardless of whether or not you gave this any thought as you prepared to come to St. George's today. Maybe you identify as a Christian and have come out of faithfulness to your call as a baptized member of Christ's body. Perhaps you are here because of a geographic or familial connection to this place. Or maybe

you, like the apostle Andrew, are looking for something; you have come here longing to hear a word that is good and true.

As much as our own identities have motivated our being present here today, diverse as they are, it is also true that the identity of Christ is the locus that we gather around today. It is his identity that is central to each of our readings this morning. If are attentive to what is being communicated, each passage helps us to better apprehend who Jesus is; and who we are is clarified by his light.

The first thig that we hear in our readings today is that Jesus, our God, is essentially salvation.

Interestingly, the lectionary moves us away from Matthew's Gospel this week for a visit with John's, in whom Jesus is called the Word: **in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God** (John 1:1). Keep this in mind as you hear the words of Isaiah: **the Lord called me before I was born**, for John writes, **He was in the beginning with God** (John 1:2). Recall now our Christmas reading where Joseph is greeted by an angel in his dream, who tells him of the child that Mary will bear: **You shall name him Jesus** (Matthew 1:21). Isaiah writes: **while I was in my mother's womb he named me**. His name is Jesus, meaning *the Lord is salvation*. Not only does Jesus save, he is salvation. His person defines the word.

Secondly, we hear that Jesus, our God, is essentially giving.

Salvation is achieved by his self-giving. **For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...** (John 3:16). And for God, who is outside of time, giving himself for our salvation has been the plan since the beginning; since foundations of the earth were laid.

Thirdly, we hear that Jesus, our God, is essentially merciful.

For what is mercy, but holding back, or taking away, that which we justly deserve. John the Baptist's proclamation about Jesus' identity is in perfect accord with salvation being central to who he is: "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!". Like a good doctor who treats the root cause of a problem and not only the symptoms, I want to underscore that it is not the wages of sin that are taken away, but the sin itself. Often when Christians speak about mercy the talk about being spared punishment that we deserve; but this is better news that being spared a consequence. Jesus makes it possible not to sin; not only to be made clean, but to be found holy in him. This too is a declaration of a work that is outside of the bounds of time. For God it is a work that has been completed.

Apprehending that Jesus is essentially salvation, essentially giving, and essentially merciful is central to our understanding our own identity. My friends in recovery would be the first to tell us that you cannot take something away without replacing it with something else. The Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world; your sin, my sin; and replaces it with himself. He gives himself. John writes: to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12). This is who you are: a child of God.

You are not defined by your mistakes, or your successes. You are not the sum of your productivity or your finances. You are not bound to be identified by things out of your control. You are not defined by what your family or your friends or your coworkers think of you. You are defined by God's love. Your identity is found in him.

Though we share a common identity, given by God, as his children, we are each of us still particular people. I want to look, briefly, at a curiosity in the Gospel lesson to expound this paradox of individuals with a common identity:

Maybe it is because of the weight of John the Baptist's identification of Jesus as the Lamb of God, or the fact that the *Agnus Dei* has a rich musical tradition in our Anglican liturgy, or the fact that it is sung moments before we receive the Eucharist, but it has always seemed to me almost a comical point of discord that the gospel moves from this grand declaration of who Jesus is to the very ordinary detail of where he is staying. But these two points are connected, are they not?

When I arrived in Regent Park, I learned that folks in this community also use chosen or adopted names, and I received another one there. It was not a 'badge of honor' like Cinderella. Instead, they gave me a name that was meant to be pejorative: Fancy Girl. This name was meant to indicate my otherness. I was not one of them, but an outsider.

Over time, the opportunity to share my life with my neighbours gave us a chance to grow in our understanding of who we were as individuals. As they got to know me, they stopped seeing 'Fancy Girl', and I am forever blessed by having gotten to know them. At the same time we were also forging a common identity. We were a community; we did life together.

The leaders of the ministry in Regent Park used to point to this story of Jesus in John's Gospel, and the question of "where are you staying?" as a model for our work in that community. Jesus living among his own is how he chose to reveal himself. It is also how he formed a community to participate in his work.

The community that we are part of in our common identity as children of God is the church. And the church is where we are left in our gospel reading this morning. Our reading concludes with Jesus giving Simon the name Peter, which means 'rock'. Who Peter is in Christ changes the shape of his life, as he participates in Jesus ministry: **"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it,"** (Matthew 16:18).

Like Peter, Jesus invites us into a life and ministry shared with him. Leave here knowing, that as a child of God, he takes away our sins and give us himself. As a child of God, he wants to do amazing things with you too. Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, and see what amazing things will unfold from being enfolded in him. Amen.