

Identity

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the nine o'clock service, January 09, 2011.
The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ.
Based on Matthew 3:13-17.*

I'm not a big watcher of television, but I saw a commercial recently that made me laugh—sort of. It shows a burly man driving a large pink SUV carelessly through a parking lot, leaving a trail of damage in his wake. As you watch the pink SUV bang into one car after another, you hear a running commentary from the driver, who's clearly not concerned about how much all this damage is going to cost. The driver you see is that burly man, but the driver's voice you hear is that of a teenage girl. This is one of those commercials about identity theft. I laugh at first, but it's a rueful laugh. If you've ever had your "identity" stolen, as I did years ago, you know how nightmarish it is.

Surely I am more than my social security number, my driver's license, my passport, my account numbers—though those things are important and necessary for living in our world. (As anyone who doesn't have them will tell you.)

What gives you your identity? What makes you who you are?

Some parts of our identity are givens. We don't have any say over them, at least when we're young: who our parents are and the rest of our family tree, what part of the country/world we live in, our socio-economic class, whatever genetic code we get wired with.

As we move through life, various things attach to our identity, our sense of self. What schools we attend, our test scores, our degrees, whom we marry or partner with, what work we do, what organizations we belong to, what causes we champion, what our own children achieve or don't, how we respond to the changes and chances life throws at us.

As we grow and mature, identity becomes more faceted, more layered. In fact, that's one of the tasks of life—maybe THE task of life—isn't it, to figure out who we really are, why we're here, and how we're going to express our identity in the world. What are my interests, hobbies, passions? What are my strengths and weaknesses? What work do I choose, or what work chooses me? What kind of person am I? What kind of person do I want to be? What is my purpose in life? Who am I and why am I here?

The writer of Matthew's gospel has been painting a picture of Jesus, revealing Jesus' identity piece by piece. In his first chapter, Matthew lists 42 generations, tracing Jesus' ancestry back to Abraham. Matthew's account of Jesus' birth shows Jesus as conceived from the Holy Spirit, to "save his people" (1.21). Jesus is Emmanuel, "God with us" (1.23). The wise men from the East identify Jesus as "the child who has been born king of the Jews" (2.2), fulfilling the prophecy for "a ruler who is to shepherd Israel" (2.6). Jesus is "the Messiah," the anointed one. John the Baptist identifies Jesus as "the one who is more powerful than I am coming after me" (3:11).

And now this: *And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."* Matthew's picture of Jesus' identity is full.

The picture of Jesus' identity is full but not complete. Jesus' baptism is just the beginning. How will he express this identity? Immediately after his baptism, Jesus spends forty days in the wilderness, figuring out what it means to be who he is and how he will live that out.

It's not a coincidence that we celebrate baptisms on the day when we read this gospel of Jesus' own baptism, when his identity is revealed. The church considers this one of the most appropriate times in the whole year for baptism. Here in just a few minutes, and again during the 11a.m. service, we'll baptize little ones who, by their baptism, gain a new and foundational part of their identity: Christian.

It seems to me that the primary identity of every person, EVERY person, period, is "beloved child of God." God has created each of us and each of us is beloved of God. That is true and will always be true, regardless of external identifiers or behaviors, regardless even of which religious path—or none—we choose to follow. When someone is baptized into the Christian faith, as Mackenzie will be in just a few minutes, they claim their primary identity as beloved child of God and promise to live out that identity, to express that identity in the Christian path, which, as we know, is often a winding path. Friends who are Jewish express their primary identity as beloved children of God in the Jewish path. Friends who are Muslim express their primary identity as beloved children of God in the Muslim path. Friends who are Buddhist express their primary identity as beloved children of God in one of the Buddhist paths. Friends who avoid religion altogether are beloved children of God and express that primary identity in ways they choose for themselves. There is nothing we can do to make God love us any more; that is not what baptism is about.

And there is nothing we can do to make God love us any less, even something like what happened in Tucson yesterday.

Today at her baptism, Mackenzie claims her primary identity as beloved child of God and promises to express that identity in the Christian path. I don't know if you can see Mackenzie up here, but she is beautiful! If you can see her, you'll notice that Mackenzie is a little too young to claim and promise for herself, so her loving parents and sponsors are going to claim that identity and make those promises for her, until she is old enough to make them for herself. When it comes to understanding what really happens at baptism, who really understands that?! Whether you're one year old and screaming through your baptism or whether you're the Archbishop of Canterbury, who really understands what's happening in baptism . . . or at the communion table for that matter!

This baptism is not just about Mackenzie, or even just about Mackenzie and her parents and sponsors. It's about all of us gathered here. All of us are about promise to support "this person in her life in Christ." Be careful when you say these words—this is a huge promise! We're promising to do what it takes to make sure there's a church here for Mackenzie to grow up in. We're promising to pray for Mackenzie and her family, yes, and more than that. We're promising to give of our time and talent and treasure so this place will stay open and welcoming and functioning as a church, a community of Christ. We're promising to teach Sunday School, to be an usher, to carry the cross, to fold the service leaflets, to serve on the vestry.

And this is not a one-way street; we're not doing all the giving. Mackenzie's baptism gives all of us the opportunity to stand up and renew our own baptismal vows—those promises we ourselves made at our own baptism beginnings about how we would live as Christians. Promises about how we would go about expressing, in the Christian path, our primary identity as beloved children of God in everyday ways. Renewing our own vows reminds us of our own primary identity as beloved children of God, and reminds us of how we've promised to express that identity. Every time someone is baptized here at St. Bart's, we all renew our own baptism vows and somehow in that renewing, the Holy Spirit enters this place anew and breathes new life into all of us.

Baptism was a beginning for Jesus. Baptism is a beginning for Mackenzie. It's also a beginning for her parents and sponsors, who promise to bring her to church and to teach her at home through example how much God loves her, helping her grow in her own love for God and grow into her own relationship with God. They will all have to figure out how to go about living into this identity and these promises they are making. Even with us here to help, there are times when they may feel they are in the wilderness. Each baptism here brings a new beginning for us, for St. Bartholomew's Church, too. Hard to tell what will happen, but baptism brings in new life and new energy. What will we do with that new life and energy? Where will it take us?

In our tradition, we believe baptism—and the identity it claims—is a once-and-for-all thing. In our understanding, baptism happens once and it stays with you forever; there is no need to be re-baptized. The identity that is claimed today, beloved child of God, can never be taken away. Even if everything else that identifies us falls away, that remains.

After Mackenzie is baptized with water, a cross will be traced on her forehead with holy oil. She will be anointed, with these words: "Mackenzie, you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever."

Marked as Christ's own forever. Powerful words for a powerful truth.

Marked as Christ's own forever. Beloved child of God.

An identity that can never be stolen.

Amen.

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*For information about St. Bartholomew's
and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads
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