

A New Identity
Mark 8:31-38
Saint Mark Presbyterian

There was a tale that came at the conclusion of WWII, which some historians have researched. It took place in France as soldiers returned from war to be reunited with their families after being weary from battle, or in some cases prisoners of war.

But there were a number who returned without their tags and in such a state of shock they could not remember any details about their families, in some cases even about who they were themselves. There was a kind of PTSD amnesia that set in.

So in the days before mass media or anything like we have now, the French government had an idea to publish the pictures of those who were unidentified in the newspaper, then invite anyone who knew anything about them to come to the Paris Opera House on a Sunday afternoon.

Imagine the scene, the Opera house was packed, so many families praying that their missing relative might be there. Making it more poignant, the French official had all the men stand on stage, and then one by one, asked them to go to the microphone and into the spotlight and simply say to the audience, "Does anyone here know who I am?"

Slowly, family members came forward, and the French authorities had set up private spaces for them to become reacquainted, as family members brought out pictures, rings, memorabilia, anything which could jog the memory of the soldier.

And finally as family members told them stories, showed them pictures these men began to remember who they were.

It is sometimes just a philosophical question to ask yourself, "Who am I?" and also "Whose am I?" "To whom do I belong?"

If we were to do that we would have all kinds of different answers. By what criteria do you identify yourself? Some would of course tell our names, but maybe something personal about us. Many of us would add what we do professionally - I am a pastor, or a musician, a mechanic, an engineer, a teacher.

Maybe others would talk about our heritage or ancestry - I am Presbyterian, Scots Irish, for example. We might tell you our role in family life - I am a mom or dad, grandfather or brother.

Today we might quickly add in our red state/ blue state tribal allegiance.

And we all have a myriad of passwords which identify us online that we struggle to remember.

The point is there are so many layers on which to contemplate that question.

But in the broader sense, does that really tell us who we are?

I would like to look at this passage from Mark this morning and see it through the lens of an identity passage.

Jesus says:

"If any want to become my followers they must deny themselves and pick up their cross and follow me."

To deny themselves. Jesus puts the question to us to ask ourselves, "who am I" and also "whose am I?"

This has always been such a challenging passage, because of all the ways we have of describing ourselves, but I wonder here if Jesus may be asking us if we are willing to make our identities, in all the ways we describe them, subservient to our discipleship. Not to forget them, not erase them, but to place them behind our discipleship?

For instance, in our Old Testament passage in Genesis, identity takes on a new meaning. As covenant people we take on new identities, Sarai becomes Sarah, Abram becomes Abraham. They have new names.

The fisherman Simon claims that Jesus is the Messiah after he is given the new identity Peter the Rock. And it is interesting that Peter answers the question about Jesus' identity: "Who do you say that I am?"

New names, identities are symbolic of new journeys, transforming us and calling forth a new hope and foundation upon which we can grow.

Identities are what we all carry, work, family, tribe, etc.

But that Identity may be the thing that Jesus asks us to put into second place. What does it mean to deny ourselves and follow him?

What might that look like?

What does it mean to make your identity second to your discipleship. Again, think of it as

Identity is not just "who am I " but also "Whose am I"

As a way to try to think about this, let me share two examples that inspire me, in the lives of two different people.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta India passed away a little over 20 years ago, and much has been written about her life and ministry. She had an amazing ministry to the sick and poor of the streets of Calcutta. During this pandemic I am reminded of her care for all people who she encountered, and the way so many of our health care professionals are doing the same for people who cannot have family with them during the worst times.

Among the poorest in India, she once wrote of a dream she had that all people before they die will know that they are loved.

In Mother Teresa's work with people on the streets, she felt that hunger and poverty were terrible, but not as terrible as the feeling of being unwanted or unloved.

During her lifetime, reporters, journalists would interview her to find out the motivation for this kind of love and care.

Once she said this: "I am but a little pencil in the hand of God. The marks I make are directed by God's loving hand. All that I do is rest in the warm and loving hand of God and let God work through me."

Those who would be my followers would deny themselves, and pick up their cross and follow me.

Mother Teresa chose a new identity in Christ, -she was but a little pencil in the hand of God - which led her to this incredible journey of love and hope.

Any of her other identities became secondary.

A second inspiration personally, a Pastor named Clark Lobenstein was a member of our Presbytery. Many of you knew him or knew of his work. My only interaction was sadly that I happened to be Pastor at Silver Spring PC where he was a Parish Associate on the day he passed away. And I was able to share in the Memorial Services for Clark.

What made him unique was his life's work as founding director of the Interfaith Conference of Metro DC, where he served for some 35 years: promoting Interfaith dialogue and reconciliation across religious traditions.

Vivid in my memory is this: During the Memorial service, the church was filled with every faith tradition you could imagine. It was remarkable. Christian, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, Islamic, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Mormon, Sikh, and probably more. It was literally the United Nations of faith communities assembled for one day to show love for his work and a new hope for each other.

How had he started on this journey? Well, I can't know for sure, but in the bulletin for that day was a quote attributed to Clark:

"In the mystery of his love Jesus calls me to be his companion and depends on me to live out each day in the ministry of reconciliation"

I'd like to think that he claimed that new identity through Christ which led him to this incredible journey and led so many to a new hope. To make his other identities secondary, and to pick up the cross of reconciliation and be a companion to Jesus.

We won't all have an impact like these two individuals, but it seems for certain that we will have some challenge big or small. Some cross to bear.

It also just helps us to get through challenging times, like we are going through, in to remember who we are and whose we are.

Martin Luther, the Reformer of the 16th Century, when he had his darkest struggles, remembered his identity. He had a desk made up of blackboard material, where he would write his notes every day in chalk. In periods of extreme stress and anxiety, he would begin writing on his desk, "I am baptized, I am baptized."

He would recall that God made a claim on his life once and for all. He was initiated into the family of faith. He would remember whose he really was.

May it be so for us all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.