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Matthew 3:13-17

WHO YOU ARE

I have an identical twin sister. And yes, we do look quite a bit alike. We are well acquainted with situations of mistaken identity--when someone will mistake us for the other. It's even happened with our children, especially when they were very young when one of them would run up from behind us and hug the wrong mama. Such cases of mistaken identity have even happened to some of you when my sister will be visiting from out of town. People will often tell me that they think having a twin would be really fun. And there were indeed many positive aspects to having a twin. But there was a downside too. Throughout my childhood, very few people really got to know me as an individual, as a person with my own identity. Instead, we were known as the "twins," and my personal identity was subsumed into this collective identity. Only when we left high school and went to different colleges were we able to develop our separate identities.

The matter of identity is a curious thing. You would think that a person's identity is a pretty straightforward matter. Your identity is who you are. But actually, the issue of identity is really quite complex. For example, we don't have just one identity but many identities that define and shape us. Are you a mother, father, uncle, grandparent? Are you a lawyer, teacher, doctor, electrician? Are you an artist, musician, dancer, writer? Are you a Democrat or Republican? Are you American, Pakistani, Congolese, or Italian? Are you gay, straight, or transgendered? Are you African American, Native American, Asian American? Are you extroverted or introverted? Are you a runner, swimmer, or hockey player? Are you Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Jew, or agnostic? There are so many identities we wear. Take a minute and

think about all your many identities and which ones are you the most proud to claim for yourself. Is it your profession? Is it your role in the family? Is it your ethnicity? Or maybe one of your talents? Or is it the university you attended or belonging to a certain family? Which identities matter the most to you?

There are identities that make us proud. And then there are identities that have harmed us--maybe when in our childhood we were called "fat" by our classmates, or when a parent or teacher told us we were dumb. No matter how many years go by, some of us can never shake those painful identities that others thrust upon us. Is there an identity you have born that has caused you pain?

There are also identities that historically have been denigrated or denied by others. Racism is grounded in the notion that some people's identities are less worthy than other people's identities. In this country, Caucasian Americans went to great lengths to erase the identities of Native Americans. Native American children were sent to mission schools where white people endeavored to eradicate their native traditions, religion, and language.

Those people who identify as gay, lesbian, transgendered, or gender non-conforming have been told by society that such an identity is not permitted, that they can't be who they are. Imagine being told you can't be who you are, that your identity is not permitted. I found it interesting to learn that Merriam Webster dictionary just declared the word of the year to be the singular pronoun "they." This relatively new use of the word "they" is used by individuals who identify themselves as gender non-conforming, whose identities don't conform to the binary identities of "he" or "she." And so the pronoun "they" is the one they choose to use for themselves rather than he or she. Was there ever an identity you claimed for yourself that was demeaned or denied?

Identity is also a political matter. I am not merely referring to whether a person identifies as a Democrat or Republican but more broadly as to how identity shapes the way we think about ourselves as a nation. Here is a very revealing interaction between individuals that deals with the matter of identity that I have either heard about or witnessed myself on more than one occasion. A brown skinned person whose family may have been citizens of this country for generations is asked by a white person where they are from. And when the brown skinned person answers, "I'm from New York," or "I'm from Buffalo," or "I'm from Minneapolis," the white skinned person will say, "No, but where are you *really* from?" This interaction speaks volumes about the underlying assumptions made by white people about what skin color is necessary to be considered an "authentic" American.

You see, this issue of who we are is indeed very complex. The issue of identity is sociologically complex, politically complex, physiologically complex. This matter of who we are is also personally complex. We think we know who we are, but then what happens when circumstances change? What happens to our cherished identity when we lose our job or retire? Or when our children grow up and leave the home? Or when our bodies age and we can no longer physically do the activities that defined our sense of self? Who are we then?

The baptismal story of Jesus answers this question of our identity. It answers this question by first answering the question about who Jesus is, and then from knowing who Jesus is we can know who we are. Matthew tells us that as Jesus is baptized, a voice from heaven declared, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The use of the third person in this declaration underscores that that the proclamation was not because Jesus needed to know who he was but so that Matthew's readers--you and I--will know who Jesus is. God's Son. The Beloved.

Many people wonder why Jesus was baptized in the first place. As God's son, surely he had no need to be cleansed of sin? Why then did Jesus receive baptism? Jesus' baptism underscores that Jesus joins us in the realities of our very human and very messy lives. If you've ever stepped barefoot into a river or a lake, you may recall the feeling of the mud squishing up between your toes or the sharp jagged rocks that hurt when you stepped on them. In stepping into the River Jordan, Jesus joined us in experiencing the mucky and rocky places of life--both literally and symbolically. And then having joined us in the muck, he lifted us to a resurrected life. In other words, Jesus is baptized so we will know who we are: we too are God's beloved.

If you are observant when the Sacrament of Baptism is celebrated, you will notice that we don't use the person's last name when carrying out the baptism. We just use the first and middle names. And that may seem strange until you think about what a last name signifies. A last name signifies a person's family--the family to which a person belongs. But in baptism, we declare that we are members of *God's* family. And we are given a new last name--I suppose that would be "God's beloved." We belong to God. *That's* our new identity. This identity embraces all of who we are--all our identities, including that of sinner, of one who is broken, imperfect, and in need. We are God's beloved. This identity as God's beloved is supposed to shape our lives and guide our choices. We are God's beloved. It is an identity that can heal us and free us from shame and guilt. We are God's beloved. This identity can center us and ground us when circumstances of life threaten us, or call us to question who we are, or demean us, or deny us, or attempt to thrust other identities upon us. We are God's beloved. Nothing can shake that. Nothing can threaten that. Baptism tells us *whose* we are: we are God's beloved.

But if we belong to God, then that means that our lives are not completely our own to do with or act however we wish. God's beloved are called to a brand new life. The identity of

God's beloved claims us but also calls us to follow the one who got up out of the River Jordan and demonstrated a radically new quality of life. And thus, baptism not only tells us *whose* we are but also *who* we are: we are disciples of Christ. We are the people who walk the way of love, the way of grace, the way of forgiveness, the way of radical inclusion, the way of abundant generosity. That's our identity.

Baptism is not a magical moment. God doesn't love us more after we are baptized than before we were baptized. We believe that baptism does not bestow God's love but that baptism *acknowledges* the love of God that is already there. And that is an important distinction. That means that everyone, whether they are baptized or not, is also God's beloved. And thus, if they are God's beloved, we must treat them as God's beloved--regardless of whatever kind of identity they wear. Whether they are rich, poor, Christian, Muslim, gay, straight, transgendered, Republican, Democrat, documented, undocumented whatever their identity, first and foremost they are God's beloved.

It is said that the famous German reformation era theologian, Martin Luther, would begin each day by placing his hand on his head and declaring, "I've been baptized." It was a way of remembering each day his identity: whose he was and who he was. Because this identity shapes our understanding of ourselves. And this identity dictates what our priorities in life will be. This identity affects how we treat other people. And this identity can sustain us when we face our own mistakes or experience life's hardships. I am God's beloved. I am a disciple of Christ. When we recall this identity, then neither we ourselves nor anyone looking at our lives should ever suffer from a case of mistaken identity.