

Living Into Our Christian Identity

Coming to grips with our identity is a life-long challenge. People are known to have all sorts of identity crises. And it helps to have a sense of humor and be able to laugh at ourselves.

A 60-year-old man had a stroke and was taken to the hospital. While in ICU he had a near death experience. Seeing God he asked, “Is my time up?” God said, “No, you have another 23 years 2 months and 8 days to live.” Upon recovery the man decided to stay in the hospital and have his nose fixed, as he had always thought it was too large! He even had someone come in and change his hair color and brighten his teeth. Since he had so much time to live, he figured he might as well make the most of it.

After his last operation he was released from the hospital. While crossing the street on his way home, he was struck by a car and killed. Arriving in Heaven before God, he said, “I thought you told me I had another 23 years to live! Why didn't you guide me away from the path of that car?” God replied, “Oh sir, I'm so sorry, I didn't recognize you!”

As I said earlier, coming to grips with our personal identity is a life-long challenge. Growing into self-awareness is what childhood is all about. Learning what we like and what we dislike; learning to share turns, learning to share mommy or daddy; learning to give help and to receive help; and learning what we are good at and learning our limitations.

Some of this learning about our identity – who we are – comes easy and some of it is hard. It is perhaps most difficult when we reach adolescence and our bodies begin to change and we grow even more self-conscious to the point of both exuberance and painfulness. Mood swings are so up and down – we many not

know who we are from one day to the next. Things begin to level off into adulthood. We usually have a sense of where we fit in best: We look for a niche, a job, a career, a calling that suits our hopes and dreams, our goals. We look for a life style that reflects our values, our needs, and our “sense of identity.” And we may be comfortable in that for varying periods of time. But things continue to change in our lives as we get older, even as they did in our earlier years, and our sense of identity fluctuates, though most of the time less dramatically. Our personality has been pretty much shaped by now. We are an introvert or an extravert; we are down to earth and practical or we are spontaneous and impulsive; we are optimistic or pessimistic; we live to please or we live to challenge. Of course all these are generalizations. Yet as adults, we have a pretty good sense of identity about where we fit on the scale of things. And another thing is for sure, we all have our fears and our safety zones, both of which have a lot to do with our sense of personal identity.

That seems to be the case with the message of the Prophet Isaiah in Chapter 43, which begins, “Thus says the Lord your God, who created you, who formed you, 'O people of Israel, fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine...when you pass through the waters, I will be with you...because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you...everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

The Prophet Isaiah delivers these words because the people of Israel had forgotten who they truly were. Their sense of identity had eroded. Just like our sense of identity escapes us at times. We wonder at what we've become, who we've become. We get knocked off our center and do and act and “be” in ways that betray our deeper sense of self.

Bob Dylan, a living musical legend, now in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, was interviewed by Rolling Stone magazine after his early, brilliant career in the 1960's began to fade in the 1980's, only to reach a new zenith in the late 1990's and on into the new millenium. They asked him what had happened to the quality of his music and song writing in the 1980's. His reply was, "I forgot who I was."

Don't we all at times, especially times of crisis in our lives, forget who we are? For Bob Dylan, there had been the deaths of too many close friends, failed marriages and divorces, bad business deals, etc. Some things we can all relate to in our own personal ways. Things that knock us off our center and challenge who we thought we were.

It is at times like this that we need reminders – reminders which get us back on track, back to our true identity.

Isaiah provided that reminder to the people of Israel as I showed earlier. John the Baptist provided that reminder in his ministry, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sin that would restore the identity of a people who had strayed from the family of God.

Then Jesus superseded John's reminder to assume the mantle of the Messiah – to be an eternal reminder for all Christians about our core identity as children of God and followers of the way of Jesus.

Christians are not biologically born.

Christians are spiritually made.

To become a Christian in identity requires a number of things. It requires a special way of renouncing certain ways of the world that lead, not to life, but to death. It requires a special way of dying to be born anew! It requires a special proclaiming of faith in Jesus as your Savior. It requires accepting the Holy Spirit into your life as your spiritual guide.

Each of these four elements are symbolized in the Christian sacrament of Baptism which is intended to provide us with our core identity as Christian people of God.

Let me share a little commentary and food for thought on each of these four elements.

Element One: To be made a Christian, each one of us must renounce the power of evil. Make no mistake about it, evil is extremely powerful. In his book, *The People of the Lie*, psychologist Scott Peck describes evil as “the state of chaos created by people in this world.” Their intentions are to tear down and destroy the goodness that God created – all that God pronounced as good in the Book of Genesis. To truly become a Christian, each of us must renounce the force of evil and follow the way of Jesus that produces the good and abundant life in the Kingdom of God.

Element Two: To be made a Christian, each one of us must die and be reborn in Christ. Some people don't much care for the language of evil and death, but each of us must acknowledge that every day, in some way, we all face little deaths. In the words of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, guru of death and dying wisdom, our physical capabilities diminish as we get older; dying eyesight, or hearing capacity, dying to memory loss, diminishing energy, etc. Aging isn't for sissies is it?! But all are challenged to grow spiritually in the face of these little deaths, to live into Christ who faced death on the Cross. It also means dying to our overinflated egos, to our self-centered ways of doing things, and ultimately it also means dying to the all too pessimistic belief system that the actual end of life is only that, and nothing more. If you can see dying as a part of God's plan of preparation for eternal life in Christ, dying to self, dying to the old ways of gracelessness and lovelessness are really helpful. To truly become a Christian,

each one of us must die to the power of sin – the power that would seek to separate us from God's goodness and that requires us to become alive in Christ Jesus!

And that leads us to Element Three: To be made a Christian, each one of us must, from our heart, proclaim faith in Jesus as our Savior. And while modern theology recognizes (and I am one of its loyal followers) that there are many valid pathways that lead us to the heart of God, it is necessary to choose the one that clearly best suits you, and then commit to and follow it faithfully. To try and take all the roads from a sampler of Faith traditions is not practical nor very efficient. (Let's not waste precious energy here.) Respect for all paths is important, but following all paths is not really practical if possible. Christians are claimed by Christ and we follow his path, and we know it in our hearts when it happens.

Which leads us to Element Four: To be made a Christian, each one of us must accept the Power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The symbol of water in baptism is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible movement of the awakening of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Spirit moves where it will; it grows within us as individuals and within the Community of Christian Faith. It is our inspiration for mission outreach to help those in need – to love our neighbor as ourselves. It is our inspiration for the stewardship of our time, talent and treasure, and for stewardship of this good Earth; for Social Justice; for Religious Education; for Christian Fellowship in the ministry of all believers. The Holy Spirit showers us with love and grace and peace. It knows no hatefulness or prejudice toward others and offers an extravagant welcome to people of all races, all differing abilities, all classes and sexual orientation, and all economic backgrounds.

In James McBride's book, The Color of Water, McBride tells the story of his mother, Ruth, who was raised by an Orthodox Rabbi in the South, then married an African-American man who took her to Brooklyn where she raised a family of 12

children.

Ruth embraces Christianity as her reborn identity along with the black parishes of her husband, who is a preacher. When her dark-skinned son, James, asked his mother about her light skin, she dances around the answer throughout his childhood. Later, James, struggling over his own sense of identity, asks his mother, “What color is God?” Ruth finally has a clear answer for her son. “God doesn't have a color,” she says, “God is the color of water.”

I share this story as I close because I believe we should come to understand baptism and faith in Christ, bearing in mind the oneness of God's spirit and the unity of God's love for all of God's children. Still, let us remember that our baptismal identity, as a Christian, requires a number of things:

It requires renouncing sin and evil.

It requires dying to self-centeredness.

It requires proclaiming faith in Jesus as our Savior.

It requires accepting the Holy Spirit as our comforter and challenger and guide, to be the very best Christian we can be!

Living into these requirements will nurture our souls and renew our spirits as we solidify our “Identity in Christ.” AMEN