

## A Question of Identity

In these times of high fuel costs, many airlines are canceling flights. On one particular day at an airport in a city whose name I won't mention, a crowded flight to Washington, DC, had been canceled. A solitary agent was re-booking a long line of inconvenienced travelers. Suddenly an angry passenger pushed his way to the desk. He slapped his ticket down on the counter and said, "I HAVE to be on this flight and it has to be FIRST CLASS."

The agent replied, "I'm sorry sir. I'll be happy to try to help you, but I've got to help these folks first, and I'm sure we'll be able to work something out."

The passenger was unimpressed. He asked loudly, so that the passengers behind him could hear, "Do you have any idea who I am?"

Without hesitating, the gate agent smiled and grabbed her public address microphone. "May I have your attention please?" she began, her voice reverberating throughout the busy terminal. "We have a passenger here at the gate WHO DOES NOT KNOW WHO HE IS. If anyone can help him find his identity, please come to the gate."

When you and I come into this world as helpless infants, are we missing an identity, a self-awareness of who we are? We know whether or not our needs are being met: if we are hungry or cold or wet. But, as babies, it seems to take us some time to realize that we are persons in our own right, distinct from our parents. If you've ever been around a two-year-old, you understand that his favorite word is "NO!" That's because he—or she—needs to establish a separate identity.

As we grow, we continue to grapple with identity issues. When adolescents look in a mirror, blank faces stare back at them. They see themselves reflected in the eyes of their contemporaries. It's all about conformity. What their parents and other adults think of them decreases in importance. Their self-perceptions are shaped by the opinions of their peers, and those judgments can be cruel. Teenagers may experience the onset of an identity crisis that can last well into young adulthood.

Many of you are members of the baby boom generation. You've probably seen the hair color commercial targeting this generation that swore we were never going to get old. But back in the day, it wasn't unusual for a person to say, "I'm having an identity crisis; I'm going off to find myself." It's all about me, when

I don't have a clear concept of who I am and I'm struggling to find out. It's a case of missing identity.

And identities can go missing in more ways than one. You can't pick up the paper, turn on the TV news, or log onto the Internet these days without hearing about identity theft. It happened this year to a member of one of the churches in this church. Through one means or another, personal information is obtained illegally. In this electronic age, large sums may disappear from an account before the victim is even aware of a problem.

A few weeks ago, hackers gained access to the on-line files of major retailers, illegally obtaining personal information on thousands of customers. At about the same time, on the morning news, we heard the report of an incident in Mount Pleasant. A U.S. Postal Service employee had gone to lunch, leaving ten passport application files lying on a desk, neglecting to lock them up. You guessed it—the files were stolen, along with names, Social Security numbers, mothers' maiden names, and other sensitive information. Identity theft. In our time, in every time, identity matters.

Do you think that when people first come to church, it's to get a clearer sense of identity? Surely a variety of reasons exists. Some may be curious about the identity of another: What are people

saying about this Jesus? Others may hope for personal benefits: What can this Jesus do for me?

This may have been the attitude of people in and around Caesarea Philippi when they hear Jesus is in town. The setting of this Sunday's reading from Matthew's Gospel, Caesarea Philippi actually should have been called *Fort Caesarea Philippi*. It was a military stronghold named for both Caesar in Rome and Philip, tetrarch of northern Judea. Residents of Caesarea Philippi have read the Hebrew Scriptures that promise a Messiah. They long for a mighty warrior, a liberator to overthrow the despised Roman forces that occupy their country. They misunderstand Jesus and his mission. They hope he can do something for them—something to improve their quality of life—but they really don't know who he is. They listen to the buzz around town, hear what others are saying about Jesus—that maybe he's a prophet: John the Baptizer come back to life, or Jeremiah, or even Elijah himself.

Like them, you listen to what people say about Jesus. You see him reflected in the eyes of others. And you hear the first question that he poses to his disciples in today's text—to the Twelve and to you and me as well: "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"

For twenty centuries, people have been debating about who Jesus is. Second-century Gnostics, who believed that all matter,

including bodies, is evil, contended that Jesus was merely a spiritual being who only *appeared* to suffer and die on the cross. Of course, if Jesus did not really die, he could not have been raised from the dead. Clearly, in those early centuries and still today, those who deny his human nature also deny his resurrection, on which our faith rests.

In the modern era, some citizens of the Age of Reason have tended toward the opposite view. Sophisticated people, they say, don't buy into all those miracle accounts in the Bible. Crossing of the Red Sea? Virgin birth? Raising of Lazarus? Just stories, they say. These are the same folks who will tell you that Jesus of Nazareth was nothing more than a wise teacher of ethics. A great prophet of morality. Period. In every age, those who deny his divine nature also deny his power as Savior and as Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, as the Psalmist sings.

Listening to what others say about Jesus can give us an extremely distorted picture of who he really is. Maybe we should pay a little more attention to what people think and say about *us* as his followers, as his church. People love to watch those of us who bear the name *Christian*—to see if the faith and values we profess are visible in the deeds of our daily lives. On Sundays, we talk the talk. On the other six days of the week, do we walk the walk?

That's precisely the message of the Apostle Paul to Christians at Rome in today's Epistle reading. "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.*" Paul's writing about identity: about who we are as the community of faith and as its members.

We live in a market-driven society that attempts to train us from birth to be avid consumers; that entices us with seductive messages to spend and to buy; that tries to convince us that violence and sexuality qualify as entertainment; that tempts us with glittering idols. Do we accommodate to this culture? Are we conformed to this world?

Or are we transformed by the renewing of our minds? Transformation and renewal mean that it's no longer all about me. Transformation and renewal mean that I stop asking Jesus: *Who are you and what can you do for me?* Transformation and renewal mean that I ask God: *What is your perfect will for my life?* Transformation and renewal mean that I wait in silence, listening for the divine response.

When we listen in silence, we are made ready to hear the second question Jesus asks. Remember, he has already asked: *Who do people say that I am?* You know that people have various

answers to this question, and that some of these answers contain more truth than others. But now, Jesus puts the ball in your court, with one more question, with the most important question of all. It's a question of identity: *Who do you say that I am?*

Beloved, everything depends on how you answer this question. Like Peter, you make your confession. In community, you confess Jesus with the earliest creeds of the church: the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed. The Jesus of history *is* the Christ of faith. He is fully divine and fully human, having two natures coexisting in one person, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation. He has to be human so he can reach us. He has to be divine so he can save us.

*Who do you say that I am?* The question is not rhetorical. It's your answer to this question, it's who you say *he* is, that determines who *you* are. This confession shapes your identity and provides you with an identity that can never be stolen from you. You are a person who knows the truth about who Jesus is. You are a follower of Jesus the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God. And what difference is that going to make in your life?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the blessed Holy Spirit. Amen.