

Elizabeth L. Windsor, D.Min.
The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Exodus 1:15-2:10
Psalm 100
Matthew 16:13-20
Romans 12: 1-8

Training Camp for Christians” Practicing the Realm of God

We are hearing great deal about “identity politics” as of late. The subject has taken center stage in our national drama particularly since the horror of Charlottesville, and has been the topic of pundits and editorial writers, and yes, even preachers. As our congregation did at the Temple two weeks ago, many of us have stood with those who are under siege because of their identity. We have written letters to congresspersons, worked with our town governments and school boards, fed the hungry, clothed the naked. We do our very best to love our neighbors as ourselves. We struggle to understand our white privilege. We study and we pray. We know “Identity” is complex in the world in which we live.

I was not surprised to discover the Scriptures for this Sunday are all about identity. The Old Testament reading tells of a people “ruthlessly” held in slavery simply because they are Hebrews. They are so feared by the Egyptians that Pharaoh orders all of the male Hebrew babies killed. But through the cleverness of his sister and his mother, one Hebrew baby boy has a different fate. Put in a basket and floated down the river, Pharaoh’s daughter finds the baby boy in the basket. She immediately identifies him as “one of the Hebrew children.” His identity is named and is not held against him. Rather it is protected. With the help of this baby’s mother and sister, the Pharaoh’s daughter saves the boy, but she does not adopt him as her son until he is “grown up.” His Hebrew identity is nurtured and formed in the Levite household of his birth parents. Once grown, the Pharaoh’s daughter names him “Moses,” because she “drew him out of the water.” But in Hebrew, “Moses” means “one who draws out.” His Hebrew identity having already been formed, Moses will be the one God chooses to “draw out” the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt and into freedom.

Our Gospel lesson for this morning is also about identity. The text is familiar to us. Jesus is on the road with his disciples and he asks them “Who do you say I am?” They respond with things they have heard others say about Jesus. Their response seems to be incorrect, and we imagine Jesus using his best “teacher” voice asking again, “But who do you say I am?” Peter finally proclaims, “You are the Messiah, the son of the Most High God!” This response earns Peter “the keys to the kingdom of heaven.” Peter’s answer identifies him as the rock on whom Jesus will build his Church. This is why the later Church understands Peter to be the first Pope; he has the right theological answer.

But I wonder if hearing the story this way, we miss something else revealed about Jesus’ identity. So let’s try it a different way. Last week, we heard the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman – a gentile outside of “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” who has come to Jesus for help. She convinces Jesus that in God’s realm there are crumbs enough from the table so that everyone can eat. And in so

doing, she opens Jesus' heart to the possibility that the "good news of God's mercy and justice" is not just "good news" for the Jewish people; it is for gentiles too.

It must have come as a shock to Jesus. Matthew makes clear over and over in his Gospel that Jesus is a devout Jew. From the time of his baptism and his wrestling in the wilderness, we believe Jesus *knows* what God has sent him to do. But what if that isn't the whole story? What if Jesus is discerning his call along the way? The encounter with the Canaanite Woman forces Jesus to question the exclusivity of his Jewish identity. This must have caused him to re-think both his identity and his ministry.

Perhaps the point of the story is not the correct answer in service of a theological purpose. What if Jesus' question is a plea for help to figure out who God calls him to be? "Who do you say I am?" As usual, the disciples are slow to catch on. They first answer the question with the names of Jewish prophets; their answers have no room for any but the Jews. But the answer doesn't fit with Jesus' experience anymore, so he turns again to the people who have been on the road with him. They have heard him teach, seen him heal the sick and feed the hungry. They were with him when the Canaanite Women knelt at Jesus' feet. Maybe Jesus needs their help in identifying himself in light of all that has happened and so he asks again, "Who do you – the ones I trust the most, the ones who know and love me– who do you say I am?" Peter senses Jesus' deeper plea – he makes room for the experience of a broader mission, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Jesus is the one who embodies the realm of God for all. Can you hear the relief in Jesus' response? "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father in Heaven." Peter affirms for Jesus the changing identity that Jesus is discerning. It is a work in progress. Perhaps that is why Jesus commands them to tell no one that he is the Messiah . . . it is too big to absorb all at once. More experience, conversation, reflection and discernment within this community of disciples are needed in order to fully understand who God calls Jesus – and the disciples – to be. It isn't just about Jesus and Peter. Their identities only have meaning if they serve the furthering of God's re-creation of the world.

So what does this tell us about the identity of those who follow the way of Jesus in this time and place? Well, there are plenty of clues in both the Psalm we read this morning and the passage from Romans we shared in the Call to Worship. The Psalm clearly identifies who we are- "We are the Lord's; we are the people of God;" a community of faith bound together by a call to God's greater purpose of healing and loving the world. Paul describes the identity of the Christian community in more detail, "We who are many are one body in Christ – and individually we are members one of another. Paul insists that the "one body" makes us "members of one another." And as "members of one another", we belong to each other. We are responsible for not only our own gifts and graces, but those of our sibling members. Paul identifies some of what those gifts might be –teaching, preaching, prophesying, ministering, giving. It is this "one body" that helps us to answer our own identity question "Who do you say I am?"

Just like those first disciples with Jesus on the road, we serve each other by reflecting back to each other the gifts we see in each other. We may think we are a giver or a minister or an exhorter, but it is the “one body” who identifies and draws out those gifts. We also may believe our gifts are not as teachers or leaders or prophets and it is the “one body” that discovers some gift in us that we might not recognize, and perhaps pushes us to grow beyond our comfort zone. We identify as both the discerned and the discerners. And we hold each other accountable for way in which our gifts serve each other and the world God loves and invites us to serve. You have heard Pastor Steve remind us that St. Matthew’s is a community of practice because it forms our Christian identity. We gather each week to practice being generous. Here we imperfectly try on forgiveness for ourselves, and for those whom we need to forgive. Here we tell the old stories and add new ones. Here we are taught to pray and lift others needs, concerns and joys before God. Here we share in the bread of life and the finger foods of Coffee Hour. Here we discern our gifts and graces. Here we find our strength and our resolve to go out those doors and do the work we are called to do for the sake world that God lovingly created and Jesus reconciles through the Holy Spirit working in us.

We are “one body” for a *purpose*. Sometimes, it can be difficult to discover that purpose. The competing voices of our culture identify us by our roles, genders, skin colors, political party, religion and economic status. But none of these projected identities offer us a truthful answer to our question of “Who do you say I am?” Preparing for this sermon, another identity question was put before me this week. In an article for the blog *Patheos*, priest and Garrett-Evangelical Theological School professor, Frederick Schmidt asks, “*What do you identify as Church?*” Professor Schmidt shares some common answers to this question:

“For far too many, the answer is often that it is a place that my/our needs are met. It’s not uncommon for people to say that they have chosen a church because it had a program for their children or that the church had an outstanding music program, that the time of the services fit with their lives, or that they liked the preaching. To put it crassly, some people treat the church as an end-user of a product and, to be fair, we’ve often “sold” the church, as if that’s exactly what it is.”

This judgment is harsh, but we live in a fee-for-service culture so it is not surprising that this expectation has crept into the Church’s identity. Schmidt offers a much better question for those who choose to identify as followers of Jesus:

“Where can I be available for the work of Christ in the world?” — Because, in the final analysis, it’s not all about us, about our needs, or about the needs of our families. The church is a living extension of the incarnation and is meant to be a living, breathing embodiment of Christ’s love in the world that draws and embraces a broken world.”

This is the purpose of the body Paul speaks of; the community that forms and shapes us into the image of Jesus’ and sends us out to “draw and embrace a broken world” with love, justice and mercy. We find our true identity as followers of Jesus in the life of the Church. Church is where we learn our story. Church helps us find our place in

God's story. Church raises up our gifts and trains us to take those gifts out into the world in loving service.

The new program year is almost here. There will be classes and Bible studies, covenant groups, outreach opportunities and a wonderful Festival of Sharing. Think of it as training camp. On behalf of the Church, I invite you to grow your Christian identity this fall – do something you haven't before. Join a small group. Sing in the choir. Teach a Sunday School class. If you are asked to be part of a committee or take on a role that doesn't seem like a good fit to you, try it anyway – the "one body" in this place might have seen something in you that you haven't yet. We'll practice together. We'll help each other discern our gifts and graces, and grow them together. And we'll remind each other that these gifts and graces aren't ours to keep – they form us to live as images of Jesus in the world. Be intentional about attending practice each Sunday, so that when you go into the mission field in your corner of the realm of God, you know the answer to the question "Who do you say I am?" And you can proclaim with confidence and thanksgiving "I am a follower of Jesus Christ."