

January 8, 2012

Epiphany 1 – The Baptism of our Lord; Year B

Genesis 1:1-5

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11

☩ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Who am I? Each of us – consciously and unconsciously – are working on that question all of the time. Who am I? Are you aware of the many different ways you answer that question? Who am I?

Our culture offers many ways to fashion our identity. Among the most prevalent identities is: I am a consumer. I am what I consume. I have value and I define myself by what I buy: the place I live, the car I drive, the clothes I wear, the food I eat, the schools I'm associated with, the entertainment I pursue, the teams I root for, the clubs I join. The cachet and the monetary value of brand names – Cleveland Park, BMW, Brooks Brothers, Whole Foods, Harvard, Kennedy Center – increases all of the time. We often use them to give us a sense of who we are, and they either give us the illusion of feeling good about ourselves or, if we can't afford what we desire, feeling bad about ourselves.

It is a lie. It is a dangerous, mean, cruel, destructive lie, but I also know that the lie's tentacles grip me firmly and influence me. To define ourselves as we desire, we seek money, and we often take on debt, sometimes a lot of debt. Dante wrote about love that moves the sun and other stars. We talk about money making the world go round. So one way we find identity is through money, and another, especially in this town, is through political association and belief, being part of the right group.

Who am I? Deep down, most people want a more noble identity. Come to Jesus. Baptism gives us a different identity, entirely counter-cultural, a truly subversive identity based upon love and fellowship and service and dignity and growth. Paul says, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Gal 3:27) We find our true identity, our wholeness, our completion, our humanity, in Jesus. The market and brand names don't give us our true identity. Politics and our views about policy don't give us our true identity. In God, we discover our true selves, our eternal selves.

In a few minutes, baby Julia is going to be baptized, and as she grows up and then as she grows old, she'll encounter countless ways to identify herself, to center her life. Imagine in about half a dozen years from now, Julia is walking with her parents around town.¹ They're on the Mall, and Julia asks, "Mommy, Daddy, what happens in that big building with the dome?" And Jen or Greg explains, "That's the Capitol. That's where politics happens." And Julia might press and ask, "What's that?" And her parents explain, "Politics is about the creation and exercise and distribution of power."

As they stroll west down Constitution Avenue, Julia sees the White House and asks about it. Her parents explain that it's part of politics, the creation and exercise and distribution of power."

As they walk further west, they come upon the Federal Reserve Building, and she asks, "What happens there?" And her parents say, "That's the Fed. That's about economics. It tries to help markets work efficiently. It has to do with the creation and exercise and distribution of wealth."

It's a beautiful day, so pleasant that they walk further west into Georgetown, have lunch, and then walk way up Wisconsin Avenue, and they see the National Cathedral, and Julia asks, "What happens in there?" "Worship. It's like what happens in our church. People go to churches to worship, and worship is one way faith is created, and nurtured, and shared." And then they'd add, "Remember, Julia, that faith is just a fancy word for trust." That's an important point.

Who am I? What do I trust? What shapes me? The work of the church helps us to develop our identity through relationship with God. The church helps us move closer to God, become more confident of his love and care, and deepen our trust of him. It helps us align our lives with eternal reality and connects us to something more than our own anxieties.

This involves trusting God, and learning to trust God is intimately related to trusting other people. Our capacity to trust other people is fundamentally linked to our capacity to trust God. They go hand in hand.

Jesus, of course, is our model of faith, of trust. We assume he trusts God, and indeed immediately after his baptism, the Holy Spirit sent him into the wilderness where Satan tempted him, and Jesus remained true to God, true to himself, and remained faithful to God. But Jesus didn't just trust God. Look at the people Jesus trusted. Look at the apostles. Most of them did not appear worthy of trust.

Peter, one of Jesus' best friends, abandoned Jesus in his hour of need and then denied him three times, but Jesus makes him the cornerstone of the church. James and John jockeyed for position and honor, trying to exercise power, trying to be served instead of serving, and Jesus makes them part of his inner circle of apostles. Another apostle, Matthew, was a tax collector, an exploiter, quite likely a cheat, despised; another, Simon, was a zealot, possibly someone who had advocated for violent revolution; another, Thomas, didn't trust the other apostles about the resurrection. A strong theme of Mark's gospel is how dense and faithless the apostles were. Despite all their faults, Jesus trusted them.

Religion is about cooperation and unity. The original Latin root of the word "religion" means "to bind together." Faith, trust is what binds us together. Real religious life, real spiritual life helps us build trust.

Robert Putnam, a best-selling, Harvard sociologist (notice the brand name!), did extensive surveys about American religion and then wrote a book, *American Grace*.² He concluded that religious Americans are better neighbors than secular Americans. He found that they are more generous giving their time and treasure, even for secular causes.

His research showed that religious Americans are more likely to help a neighbor or a stranger, to care for someone who is depressed or homeless, to give back excess change if the cashier mistakenly hands over too much, to let another driver cut them off, to join and support

neighborhood and civic organizations, to be activists and advocate for justice. Putnam also found that people who regularly attend a house of worship report themselves as being happier and that they live longer.

One last point from Putnam: what matters is less about what religious people believe. It's not the content of faith, but that they're part of a community of faith. Trust, being a good neighbor has less to do with believing and more to do with belonging. Putnam said that an atheist who belongs and goes to church is likely to be a better neighbor than a spiritual or religious believer who doesn't join a community.

What is baptism? It's about belonging, being part of God. Baptism is God reaching out and embracing us. It shows his acceptance and love of us no matter what. No matter what. It's once and for all. God's saying, "I am always available to you. You may wander away, become a self-indulgent prodigal, or you may become a petty, angry, jealous elder brother, but I am always there for you. You may always turn back to me."

When we're baptized, God tells us, "You are my beloved child. I delight in you. You are precious to me." That's the ground of our identity and the source of our worth. The good life comes from really knowing that, feeling it, having it as part of our blood and bones. Most of us, frankly, do not appreciate it enough. In Advent, I commended a spiritual exercise: when you look in a mirror, say to that person, "I'm a beloved child of God. God delights in me." It's truth.

Baptism gives us that new identity – a beloved child of God. Accepting that identity changes us. We can live and become like the world, let the market and politics shape us, tell us who we are, or we can put on Christ and embrace an identity not about asserting ourselves, not about making a name for ourselves, not about being better than other people, but about giving and receiving, about building character through relationships, through community. Our identity is about loving each other as Christ loves us, and loving that way begins with appreciating how deeply, passionately God loves and delights in us.

Who am I? The good news is that God says, "Thou art my beloved child in whom I am well pleased."

☐ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹ The idea of walking through DC comes from Jonathan Sacks, *The Relationship between the People of God*, Address to Lambeth Conference, 2008, who imagined walking through London with his granddaughter and explaining to her that Parliament and the Bank of England create and distribute power/wealth.

² Robert Putnam's work discussed by Jonathan Sacks, "The Limits of Secularism," *Standpoint*, January/February, 2012. See also Putnam's www.americangrace.org.