

5 Easter, Yr. A

May 10, 2020

Acts 7:55-60, 1 Peter 2:2-10, John 14:1-14

One way of thinking about the scriptures this morning is to think about them in terms of mistaken identity. We hear a lot about identity today, especially around issues of identity politics and the exclusion that can result from too much emphasis on identity. So, the question: who are we, or in terms of this morning's scriptures, who was Stephen, who were those stoning him, who was Saul, who was the community Peter was addressing and finally, who was the Jesus the disciples were talking with in John's gospel.

Identity matters. Who we think we are will determine what we think is possible for our lives, or, conversely, what our limitations will be. I couldn't help but think back to some children's literature here. Remember the story of the Ugly Duckling? Major identity confusion there. But think how limited that duckling's world would have been if he hadn't discovered that he was really a swan! The other story that came to mind was the one about Arthur, destined to be the Once and Future King, but unaware of that identity until he pulled the sword out of the stone. So, how we understand our identity can allow us to live expansive lives, living into the people God calls us to be, if we get our identity right,

or it can limit us and our possibilities , to say nothing of our relationships with others if we get it wrong.

Look at the first reading, the one from Acts. Stephen's identity was as a Jewish Christian. But where we come in this morning, he's just given a lecture to some Jewish elders. They identify him as a troublemaker and, worse than that, a blasphemer, as someone who's trying to destroy their tradition. He has challenged some of their most central ideas around being chosen – that it's not about privilege, but is instead about responsibility – and they don't want to hear it. You'll note that the text even says that they covered their ears. They identify him as an enemy.

Then there's part of the first letter of Peter. He's writing to a ragtag, powerless, fringe element. Ah, he's saying to them, that may be how the world identifies you, but that's not your real identity. Who you really are is a new people, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. And because this is your identity, this is who you ARE, you are meant to proclaim the mighty acts of God who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Those issues are present in the John reading as well. Here we hear Philip saying to Jesus, if you just show us the Father we'll be satisfied. And then we hear Jesus' response, which has to be a bit exasperated: WHAT? Have I been with you this whole time and you still don't

know me? You still haven't figured out my real identity?
That the Father and I are one?

I think we could argue that these questions around identity are central to our Christian faith: who do we think Jesus is? Who do we think WE are? The collect today prays that we come to know Jesus in such a way that we steadfastly follow him. And that's reiterated in the Gospel when Jesus says that he's the way, the truth and the life.

So that's the first thing that bears looking at. Do we believe that Jesus is the way for us? Believe it so strongly that we are willing to not only identify ourselves as Christians, but to then live the life that that identity demands? Jesus' fundamental vision, his fundamental message was the kingdom. And one way to put flesh around that kingdom idea, what that would look like, is to say that it would look like that state of affairs where we all finally GOT the deep truth that God loves ALL PEOPLE, in fact, all creation. If you look at Jesus' life, what you see is a person living out what that means. Living out the truth that God was somehow present in each person he encountered. Richard Rohr has said that Jesus looked for that presence of God through all the overlying contradictions to it, until he found it and then he addressed himself to that point in the person. It's like the Eastern religions' Namaste – the bow that says the God in me recognizes the God in you. What Jesus was doing, in

looking for and addressing that point, the soul if you will, within the person, was naming the person's central identity: you are a beloved child of God.

We know that this was God's intent from the beginning, when God breathed his very life into that first human. We remember that the Bible says that we are made in the image and likeness of God. Through the centuries, there have been any number of interpretations of what that means: are we the image and likeness of God in our freedom? In our ability to choose? In our rationality? How about this: we're the image of God in our ability to love; to be kind. The Hebrew word here is *hesed* and it is one of the central characteristics, if not THE essential characteristic of God. It's translated as loving-kindness.

When I drive to Sister Bay from Baileys Harbor, someone has put out yard signs that say God loves you; he always has; he always will. And I thought, OK, that's good, I like that. But I think the next step – that that applies to EVERYONE is harder. I remember a story told by the Canadian general who was in charge of the UN peacekeeping troops in Rwanda. He recounted a conversation with an American general who said that the lives of 800,000 Rwandans would justify risking only 10 American soldiers. In response, Dallaire, the Canadian general said, "We have come from a century of genocide, and we must move to a century of humanity or else the

rage that has arisen from oppression, poverty and fear will engulf us all.”

That move, from God loves me and the people I love, to God loves EVERYONE – have we made that move? Have we been able to see that everyone’s central identity is as a beloved child of God? Sometimes it’s pretty hard to see that we have.

But sometimes we can. I just finished the book about Lincoln’s cabinet, *A Team of Rivals*. At one point, after Lincoln’s second inaugural address, there was a reception at the White House. Frederick Douglass went to attend, but was stopped at the door by two policemen who refused him admittance. They said their directions were to admit no one of his color. He assured them that he’d be welcome, but they were at an impasse. At one point, Douglass saw a gentleman he knew and he asked him to tell the president he was unable to come in. Minutes later, Douglass said, even before he reached the president, Lincoln exclaimed so that all could hear him, “Here comes my friend, Douglass. And taking him by the hand, he insisted that Douglass give him his opinion of the address.

But to add to the sense of hope that goodness is alive and well and will prevail, I’d like to tell you about some pictures that I received from Norma, pictures that, in this world that often seems about nothing but greed and resentment and division, tell a different story. There were

a number of them: one showed a little girl wiping away a tear from someone weeping on TV; one showed two bikers pulled over sharing their water with a dehydrated koala; one showed a window washer who had dressed up as spider man to delight the homebound kids, one showed a fireman giving oxygen to a kitten he'd just rescued from a fire; one was of two surfers who rescued a baby whale who had lost its way, holding it gently and caressing it and one, totally amazing was of a whole line of people pushing against a train car to move it enough so that a woman who had slipped between the train and the platform could get out.

What they all have in common is that response of loving-kindness that is at the core of our identity as children of God. And that's the hope of the world. Amen.