

January 12, 2020
Baptism of Our Lord (A)
United, Oak Park

What is Your Identity?

You may be familiar with people *naming their pronouns*, a practice that's developed in a number of circles recently, particularly in progressive and academic environments. So if I were wanting to identify which pronouns I prefer that people use when referring to me, I would place the words *he*, *him*, and *his* after my name in the signature line of my email messages. While most people would probably already assume those things about me, it's not always easy for us to determine those things about any number of people right away.

Perhaps someone has a name that is not entirely associated with a particular gender, such as Pat, or Tony, or Vic. Having a clue then about which pronouns that person prefers to use would be helpful. But there could be other situations where which pronoun is particularly appropriate may not be immediately clear. Someone who is transitioning from one gender to another would likely be more comfortable with a different set of pronouns at some point along the way. People who have both male and female characteristics starting

from birth could identify as intersex, and might possibly prefer the more open pronouns of they, them, and theirs.

How people identify themselves at this current point in time is changing, or at least has more possibilities than many of us might have considered just a few years ago. What is *your identity*?

Of course there are many other aspects to a person's identity other than gender. We identify with nationalities, or with the careers we have, or with a particular position within our families, or as fans of certain sports teams. All of these things—and so many others—make up our identities.

One place where Jesus' identity seemed to be quite certain is in the gospel reading for today when he presented himself at the river Jordan where John had been preaching sin and repentance and renewal.

John the Baptist, like many of the Old Testament prophets, had a vision of the need for all Israel to repent and start over again. He had been preaching this urgent message for some time before Jesus showed up. By the time Jesus got there, John had gathered quite a following.

John was proclaiming the need for repentance so that the Messiah would come to fix the mess of people's lives. John seems to have been convinced that God would only send this long-awaited Messiah when enough people behaved themselves well enough to make a place for him.

Finally the time seemed right for Jesus to present himself to John in order to inaugurate his ministry. So he waded into the water, perhaps standing with others who were being called to repent and to be reconciled with God. But when Jesus got up to John, something strange happened. John looked at him a bit startled and refused at first to baptize him. John said, "You're the one who ought to be baptizing me! I can't baptize you!"

Yet Jesus responded, "But this is how it should be, because we must do all that God wants us to do." And so John went ahead. John put his arms around Jesus, lowering him into the water of the River Jordan, holding him there for a moment and lifting him up.

Then, as Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens open and a dove float down on him. And he heard a voice, coming from heaven, saying "This is my own dear Son, and I am pleased with him."

In that moment, the whole of Jesus' life and purpose came into clear focus. Everything that would follow seemed to hinge on this particular event. All of Jesus' public acts of ministry—healing, teaching, challenging the status quo, being obedient to death on the cross—it all followed from his baptism. This became a prime moment in *his identity*, if nothing other than the awareness now that God was in him and that God was affirming what Jesus was doing.

What then does all of this mean to us? Surely our own baptisms don't compare with Jesus' experience. None of us is proclaimed the Son of God quite like Jesus was. Perhaps you didn't recognize a dove appearing over your head at baptism nor any other baptism you may have witnessed. Perhaps you didn't hear a voice coming from heaven either. And yet it is also true that through each of our baptisms we become one with Christ. At that moment God pronounces that we too are loved. And like Jesus, we become who we are to be through baptism.

One thing to note about Jesus' baptism was that it was a communal event, at least as recorded in the gospel according to

Matthew. There were others who had gathered at the river too, perhaps even a number of the Pharisees and Sadducees who—as we learned a few verses earlier in the third chapter of Matthew—had come out to John to be baptized as well. So when the dove landed on Jesus and the voice from heaven proclaimed him God’s beloved son, others had heard that too. It was a public occasion and Jesus’ primary work of ministry would soon follow.

As we are all made a part of the body of Christ through baptism, we all share in the same ministry to which Jesus was called. Baptism is a call for *every* Christian to some kind of *ministry*. This is made explicitly clear in the words that we all say together after someone has been baptized: “We welcome you into the body of Christ and into the mission we share: join us in giving thanks and praise to God and bearing God’s creative and redeeming word to all the world.”

Baptism changes us. It changes our identity. We are grafted onto Christ, and therefore we are one with all others who also bear the name of Christ. While baptism is certainly a gift that we receive from God—it is also a daily call to live the Christian life. It’s not just once and done,

but it's something that involves daily repentance and renewal. In baptism we respond to God's gracious call through the Holy Spirit and we pledge to be a regular part of the faith community that continually listens to God's call and that responds to others through acts of love in our daily lives.

So how is the world being transformed by the spirit of God in our lives? How you proclaim the love of God to the world around you is certainly up to you to discern along with the help of the Holy Spirit. But from baptism onward, each one of us who identify as children of God have been given the announcement that God is pleased with us. And what comes *next* is up to each one of us as we live out our baptismal covenant. How might we serve Christ in all persons? How will we strive for justice and peace in all the world?

When we take our *identity* as baptized children of God seriously it will lead us to view the world with the eyes of *God's vision of justice for all people*. That's a pretty big identity for any one of us.