

Baptismal Identity

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Acts 10:34-43

"We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and Jerusalem."

Baptism of our Lord

Movement 1 - Who Were You?

Who were the early Christians? Who were these new preachers of Jesus Christ? Who were these people gathered in this movement shouting and proclaiming something about a new life, about a new hope and about a resurrection? Who were these early Christians? Were they Jewish? Were they Gentiles? Were they fisherman or priests? Who were these early Christians?

In this passage from Acts, Peter is addressing such a question. Peter is standing at Cornelius' home, surrounded by Jews, circumcised followers of Christ, surrounded by curious onlookers and others. Peter has already made the bold move to go to this Gentile's home, the home of this Roman citizen and to hear his witness and testimony. After Cornelius speaks, after he shares about his faith experience, his prayers and his intimate experience with the Holy Spirit a question hangs in the air, who is he? Who is this man who claims to have seen a vision of Christ? Is Cornelius, this Italian centurion, this outsider, this Gentile a follower of Christ? Who is he?

Peter does not initially answer such a question. Peter does not speak to Cornelius' identity, but speaks to God's. Peter says to the crowd, do not ask who this person is, but ask who God is based on the experience of Cornelius. William Willimon points out in his commentary that Peter is starting his speech with a confession. It is a confession about the Lord. Peter draws the focus from the Roman to the reigning King, claiming that God is one who shows no partiality. God is one who has no favorites, and this Gentile can indeed be a follower of Christ. No longer is God strictly a God of the Jews, but God is a God for all people who are righteous, all people who are good, and for all people to hear the message of Jesus Christ. The question is not, who are you, but who is God.

Only from such a radical statement about God can Peter then claim his own identity as one who has heard the message of Jesus Christ, one who walked with Christ, who listened to him in Judea and Galilee. Peter is one who witnessed Christ's death, and his glorious resurrection. But these are simply credentials. Who is Peter? Who is this early Christian? Peter is a witness of Christ. He is a witness of the one who has been ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. Peter is a witness of the Christ, the risen Lord and one who will proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. The question of Cornelius' identity hung in the air, and Peter first claimed the identity of God and then his own identity as a follower of Christ. Only then does he, after witnessing the actions of the Holy Spirit, call for Cornelius and his family to be baptized and become followers of Christ.

Do you see the striking thing that has happened in this passage? This is one of the moments when the identity of Christianity changes, morphs and takes on new characteristics. No longer are Christians just Jews following a specific teacher. They are no longer Gentiles following just another religious movement. No, now they are Jews and Gentiles who are witnesses of Christ's actions, witnesses of the Holy Spirit and

proclaiming of the mercy and grace of the Lord. They are wearing new clothes; they are putting on a new name tag. Who are they? They are Christians.

Movement 2 – Who Are You?

Who are you? This is a dangerous question, a driving question. Who are you? This is a question we often would rather avoid answering. This is a question that is invasive, that is probing and intruding. Who are you?

Such a question is often asked in different ways. “Where do you live?” is a thinly veiled way of asking “who are you?” One’s neighborhood can very easily define one’s personhood. “What kind of movies do you like to watch, what kind of music do you listen to, and what kind of books do you read?” are more questions leading to the overreaching question, “who are you?” “What do you do for a living?” Who are you?

I dread that last question. It is a question that tends to reveal more than I often want to reveal. More than once I have found myself at a local establishment, enjoying fine malted refreshment and someone would ask me, “What do you do?” At that point my head starts to spin and the thoughts rush through me. Should I answer the seemingly benign question with the deeply revealing answer and open myself to the depth of questions, of projections and assumptions that many people carry about the clergy? Should I try to answer in a cryptic way, and say, “I am in sales” or “human resources” which isn’t really lying, but isn’t really telling the entire truth? Perhaps I should just buy the inquirer a drink and hope to change the subject. It is a question that is probing, that is revealing, and often, when I am at said establishment enjoying said beverage, I really do not want to share who I am. I don’t want to deal with the double take, with the dropped jaw or with the incredulous acceptance that someone “of the cloth” who isn’t Episcopalian or Catholic could actually be found doing the very normal activity of enjoying a drink (of course the only reason I can tell all of you this is because none of you are Baptist). The person should just dismiss the pleasantries of “what do you do,” and just leap to asking me, who I am, what I believe, and the details of my faith. Who are you?

We are challenged, probed and questioned for our identity daily. From the awkward first time introductions in a social gathering or work event, to the dreaded youth group ice-breakers which makes everyone look stupid we are pushed again and again to share our identity. In work, in school, in the home, at play we are being asked the question, silently and subtly, “who are you?” And we share what we want to share with a reserved and cautioned approach. We wear our name tags, but only listing the names that we want people to read. Sometimes we say Dr., sometimes Mrs., sometimes esquire, and sometimes just a first name. The question is probing, it is invasive and challenging, and we answer with a stiff arm, outstretched and cautious. Who are you? Be careful to share only what you want others to know.

Movement 3 – Dividing Identities

What do we claim as our identity? Who are you? I ask the question again with this insight into the scripture on our mind. I ask the question again in this context, in this space amongst people who have claimed a specific identity. Who are you? What are you going to claim as your identity?

I ask such a question because we, as Christians, carry amongst ourselves so many labels, so many identifying names that we end up separating ourselves. Who am I, I am a Baptist. Usually, the astute individual asks what kind of Baptist – i.e. Southern or anything else. Who are you, you are Episcopalians. What kind of Episcopalians and such a question carries meaning? Gather a group of Christians together and you will find us building up our walls with our identities and labels. We would have Lutherans cussing up a storm in one corner, Methodists and Baptist dueling over the who has the best pot-luck in another, the Quakers silently sitting and listening trying not to create a scene, the Presbyterians making a committee which has the specific task of interacting with the other groups, the Episcopalians doing things the proper way, but being sure to delineate themselves from the Catholics, the Catholics calling to all of the other groups to follow them as the true church, and the Orthodox claiming that they have been the true church since the very beginning. Imagine this motley crew of Christians gathered together. Ask them, “who are you,” and you will be overwhelmed by the din of cacophony as each group yells out its own denominational identity. What do we claim as our identity?

Or maybe we go beyond the denominations markers, the walls of institutions to those of political leanings, socio-economic leanings, or theological leanings. Are you progressive (liberal) or conservative? Are you highly educated or high school educated? Are you Democrat or Republican? In your faith, in your life, how are you going to identify yourself?

Isn't it true that when we gather in these sacred settings we don a specific identity that we may not in other places. In school or work does it matter if you are Baptist or Episcopalian? Does it matter if you attend a bells and whistles, incense burning high church or a shouting and hollering and caterwauling low church? Yet gather Christians together and the walls go up, the identities change.

I am reminded of a story by Flannery O'Connor, *The River*. In this story a young boy named Harry is told that he is going to see Bevel the preacher. He is told that he is going to see this powerful healer and preacher, and then the person watching him asks Harry for his name. Without thinking Harry responds that his name is Bevel, the same name as the preacher, and in the religious context, Harry holds onto this name in the narrative. When we gather together, our identities seem to change, and we run around like chickens with our heads cut off trying to understand what it means to be that which we have chosen to pursue and not something else. Who are you?

Movement 4 – Uniting Baptism

We are Christians. We are claimed by Christ. Our identity need not be defined by the denominational walls. Our identity need not be created by institutional inclinations. Our identity is defined by Christ. Karl Barth states that through Christ we are free to live as children of God. Through Christ we are free to say yes to the life of God. We are claimed by Christ as brothers and sisters, as children of God.

In the O'Connor story, Bevel (or Harry) is sent to be baptized, and before he goes in the water, he asks the young preacher what will happen. The preacher looks at him as says, “You will count,” plunges him in the water, takes him up and says; now you count. When we follow Christ, we count as children of the Lord, and that is where our identity falls. Our identity starts with following Christ to those baptismal waters. Our identity starts with following Christ into the river Jordan. This is the connection upon which we

all stand. This is the place upon which we all find commonality – that we have that Baptism, that connection.

It was a stroke of brilliance (or of dumb luck) that you have invited a Baptist to preach on the day when we recognize the Baptism of our Lord. I am not here to discount infant baptism, to discredit it or claim it invalid. I recognize that the Holy Spirit is active in a powerful way when parents bring forward a child and dedicate that child to God. It is a powerful moment for the parents, for the congregation, and in ways we cannot know, for the infant.

Yet when an adult enters into those baptismal waters and comes up, the symbolism strikes down any barriers of differentiation. The barriers are broken as we realize and recognize that through our baptism we are all connected. We realize that through the immersion, through the moment of drowning we lose our former life and are brought into a new life. We are connected through our baptism. If you ever have the opportunity to witness an immersion, I encourage you to do so, for it is a powerful event. It is an event that reminds us of Peter's proclamation. Who are we but witnesses of Jesus Christ who was baptized just as we are baptized. We are witness of Jesus Christ who preached and taught and healed in Judea and Galilee. We are witness of Jesus Christ who was put to death on the tree. We are witnesses of Jesus Christ who broke down the despair of Calvary, who rose again and offers us life. We are witness of Jesus Christ, connected through our baptism. Our baptism as infants, our baptism as adolescent, or our baptism as adults connects us all to that one faith in Christ, that one Lord who leads us. As it says in Ephesians, we have one faith, one Lord, one baptism, and that is our identity. That is who we are. Claimed by Christ, redeemed by Christ, named by Christ, we are followers, witnesses of Christ.

Movement 5 – Who Are You? Remix

Who are you? My brothers and sisters of the church of the Redeemer, who are you? Don't jump to your denominational identity, but to the identity that you claim with your baptism – you are a witness, a follower and a believer of Jesus Christ. Claim that new life, that new identity that you have gained through Christ. You are Christians, that is who you are.

I want to encourage you to embrace the connections we have as Christians. I want to encourage you to embrace the similarities we share as followers of Christ. Take a Sunday and go to a different church. Make sure you send your pledge here, but go and see how others worship. Go and hear how others reflect the witness of Jesus Christ. Go and see the differences and at the same time the similarities that we all share as children of God. Realize that our identity as Christians is stronger than any differentiating identity along denominational lines. Start with this experiment, and then push your leaders to consider how the churches here in Bryn Mawr can have a Christian impact on the community. I'm not looking to have a Baptist impact but a Christian impact. I'm not looking to compete with other churches but to work with others churches to feed, clothe, care, and lift up in the name of Christ.

Two years ago I preached a sermon here where I offered a striking image that people still recollect. It was an image of churches worshipping side by side separated only by a tapestry. It was an image of churches worshipping in the ways they do best, allowing the overflow to occur. Take that image of a row of churches, separated by

clothes and sheets then dropping the sheets for a mass baptism. Imagine all of the converts, all of the neophytes to Christ coming forward to be baptized in their own way. All of the clergy is in front waiting, and the infants are tenderly touched with the water and oil, the Baptists are immersed with power and profundity. All people from all denominations come forward to be baptized by their own clergy, but in the presence of all. We all watch and witness the Methodist baptize. We all watch and witness the priest bless the child. We all watch and witness the pastor ask those sacred words of the teenager, “do you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?” We all watch and witness the one baptism in different ways connected us to each other and to Christ. And then, in that moment we realize that no font is deep enough to hold the baptismal waters. No preacher holds the corner of the Jordan River. The baptismal waters go deep, connecting us all to our Lord Jesus Christ. We all have been touched by the same waters in our baptism.

The table to which this service leads is larger than what we see here. It is a table that spans through all of Christianity. It is a table that seats Episcopalians, and Catholics and Baptists and all those who have entered the baptismal waters and follow the Lord. When you come to take the bread and the cup, you are taking it with all those who have gone before you, and those who are standing with you, and who claim to be a witness of Christ to the world. The bread is eaten by all who follow Christ. The cup is shared by all who follow Christ.

Who are you? Do not rush to leave the foundation of your identity. Do not forget that which you stand on and which you claim in your baptism. You are a Christian, you are a follower of Christ.

AMEN