

A New Identity

Sermon by the Rev. DWHinkle

E5A 2-9-2020

Scripture: Matthew. 5:13-20 (5:1-20)

The theme of our Gospel lesson is “A New Identity.” (McLaren) I think the main point can be summed up in a couple of sentences: The way Jesus phrases these memorable lines tells us something important about him. Like all great leaders, he’s not preoccupied with himself. He puts others, namely, us, in the spotlight when he says, *You are the salt of the Earth. You are the light of the world.*” There is a place and time for him to declare who he is, but he begins by declaring who we are: “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.” (1)

It also goes a bit deeper: Jesus came to give us a new identity by introducing us to a new identity of God our Creator, our heavenly parent. We come to have new identities because we come to see a new identity in the God who lovingly made us.

A good background story to keep in mind is the Harry Potter series, a Christian sagas for our time. The first of the seven books (2) begins with Harry about to turn eleven years-old. He’s been living with his aunt and uncle, who don’t treat him well. They treat him like an outsider to their home, favoring their own son Dudley. All that Harry knows about his parents are that they died senselessly in a car crash, leaving him orphaned. He lives with an orphan identity in a home where he’s not really wanted, constantly feeling like an outsider.

On the night that he turns eleven, that all changes. The half-giant Hagrid shows up to reveal to Harry that he’s a wizard, slated to go to wizarding school in the fall. Even more shocking, he learns that his parents didn’t die senselessly in a car crash. They died trying to save him from the evil wizard Voldemort, who Harry somehow did in, vanquishing his dark powers. More on how that happened in a few moments. For now, keep in mind that story of having your entire identity shift as you find out something new and different about your parents’ identity.

I think this is what Jesus is doing for us: giving us a new identity by revealing who our heavenly parent who made us truly is. The assumption in human communities up to Jesus’ time was the opposite of what he reveals in the Beatitudes. Everyone, the pagans as well as the Jews, thought they knew who God is. God is the powerful being who blesses those who are powerful in their earthly lives, and curses those who are not powerful. So, for Jesus to begin his teaching by announcing the opposite, blessed are those who are not powerful, questioned the identity of God as someone on the side of the powerful.

God was assumed to be on the side of those who:

- Do everything they can to be rich and powerful.
- Toughen up and harden themselves against all feelings of loss.
- Measure success by how much of the time they think only of themselves and their own happiness.
- Are independent and aggressive, hungry and thirsty for higher status in the social pecking order.
- And strike back quickly when others strike them, and guard their image so they'll always be popular. (3) We all probably know people like this.

It's a great description, really, of Harry Potter's aunt, uncle, and cousin, and of the powerful Roman and Jewish elites of Jesus' time, and of the powerful elites of our own time. The Jews, meanwhile, were the outsiders to power. How would they hear Jesus' announcement of God's blessings to the outsiders? They'd hear that God was truly a God who blesses the outsiders rather than the in-crowd, the have-nots rather than the haves?

But, here's the tricky part. Is the new identity of God simply that of being on a different side, the side of the outsiders rather than the insiders? We'll answer that question next week as we learn about the next surprises that Jesus shocks us with. For today, let's end with the new identity that marks each of us.

At the close of the first Harry Potter book, Harry finally gets to talk with his wise teacher Dumbledore. He wonders about the truth of his identity, which is marked by a scar on his forehead. It's a lightning shaped scar, the mark of the same curse that killed his parents. They died for him and he miraculously survived. Harry asks about this truth on which his identity depends.

"The truth." Dumbledore sighed. "It is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with great caution. However, I shall answer your questions unless I have a very good reason not to, in which case I beg you'll forgive me. I shall not, of course, lie."

Harry says, "Well . . . Voldemort said that he only killed my mother because she tried to stop him from killing me. But why would he want to kill me in the first place?"

Dumbledore sighed very deeply this time. "Alas, the first thing you ask me, I cannot tell you. Not today. Not now. You will know, one day . . . put it from your mind for now, Harry. When you are older . . . I know you hate to hear this . . . when you are ready, you will know." And Harry knew it would be no good to argue.

"But why couldn't [Voldemort kill] me?"

"Your mother died to save you. If there is one thing Voldemort cannot understand, it is love. He didn't realize that love as powerful as your mother's for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign . . . to have been loved so

deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin.” (4)

Friends, you and I are marked in our baptisms with the cross of Christ on our foreheads which changes our identities forever. We’re marked by the love of God through Jesus ’death for us. To have been loved so deeply will give us protection and power forever.

We have a new identity in Christ. How does this love give us a new identity? More next week.

Sources:

Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Paul J. Nuechterlein
Delivered at Prince of Peace Lutheran,
Portage, MI, February 22, 2015

Notes:

1. Brian McLaren, [We Make the Road by Walking](#), p. 129.
2. J. K. Rowling, [Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone](#) [Scholastic Press, 1998].
3. Brian McLaren, [We Make the Road by Walking](#), p. 128.
4. J. K. Rowling, [Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone](#) [Scholastic Press, 1998], pages 298-99.