

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Proper 7 Year C
Baptism of Indie Whitmore D'Annibale

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The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson

To me, one of the most heart-breaking lines in all of the gospels is in today's story when Jesus asks the name of the man living in the caves amongst the dead and he doesn't have one to offer. He cannot come up with a personal name, for his identity has been completely determined by the collective demons cast upon him by his community. The same thing happened this week when the man accused of murdering Joanne Cox, the British MP, stated his name in court as "death to traitors, freedom to Britain." This man has lost a sense of personal identity and has rather taken on a collective identity full of hatred and violence.

Our man in the caves doesn't know who he is because others have sensed his innate weakness and have projected their own hatred and ingrained system of violence of the Roman rule upon this poor man, to sequester him outside their community, and to ignore the demons that reside within them. Rather than dealing with their own dark motivations or desperate situations by wrestling with their own demons, they have made this man their scapegoat.

Sometimes we fall into the trap of allowing others to determine our identity. It can be as simple as being introduced as "So-and-so's husband, or daughter or mother" where our personal identity is subsumed by someone else's identity, which is more powerful, clever, or engaging. Or some people, maliciously or not, project upon others or entire groups of people that which they fear most within themselves and attempt to diminish the other person's or group's true identity.

For some reason it seems human nature to choose first to accuse others in an attempt to escape looking closely at ourselves or our inner motivations or omissions of moral behavior. I found that true of myself when I first heard of the mother whose child in her care found his way into the gorilla cage at the zoo, and as a result one of the 900 remaining gorillas on the planet was killed. I was outraged. I was ready to sling accusations upon her, until I did some of my own soul-searching and found part of my outrage at her was to mask or minimize the impact of my own over-consumerism or choice of products I purchase, which are destroying the rainforest, the natural habitat of the gorillas. It was easier for me

to violently hurl blame upon another, than to look honestly at what I was doing, even without intent or purposeful choice.

The pitiful name the man living among the dead offers Jesus is Legion, which refers to a large unit of the Roman army, the oppressors who control this city of Gerasenes located in Gentile territory.

I can imagine that for those who are living under the rule of the Roman authority, it may be their own self-hatred that they are projecting upon this person, who calls himself Legion. It can be their own self-loathing at allowing such demeaning behavior to govern their lives that they need to put that demon somewhere and this man is the target. It's easier to exile this victim to life on the margins, in the wilds, away from civilization, than look within and acknowledge the many ways they are ostracized from their purposes of life. Rather than deal with the chaotic and destructive inner spiritual world they live in, they cast it upon this man possessed with his own demons.

And I can imagine that for those part of the oppressive and powerful Roman rule, it may be the brittleness and near-death of their own souls that they heap upon this victim, who carries the sins and sorrows of the whole city.

This man possessed by the collective demons of the city acts out what the larger community has managed to repress. He becomes the scapegoat, exhibiting in his tortured mind and body what lurks in them all. When all the destructiveness is focused on this one man, stripped of his personal identity, the rest can go about leading as normal a life as possible.

So when Jesus meets this man, the demons within collectively address this super power, and try to fool him by wishing to go into the swine, as opposed to being sent back to the abyss, their worst fear. Jesus, in his power, appears to acquiesce to the demonic power, yet, as always, he has the last say, as the pigs dash into the depths of the sea, reuniting the demons with the chaos of the abyss.

With the demons gone, the man's true identity was restored. His neighbors find him to be clear of mind, properly dressed, and confident in following the man who healed him by giving him back his true self. This is what Jesus wants to do for all of us: to restore us to our true identity and remove the demons we carry, either those we have gathered ourselves or those thrust upon us by others. We hear a lot about self-identity these days, in determining which bathroom one can use, or which nightclub one should go to, and many struggle with finding what is true to them and extricating from themselves the demons others attempt to cast upon them, sending them out to live in the wilds, away from normal

society. However, as Jesus shows us in our story today, part of Jesus' healing ministry is to restore us to our true identity, and that happens by casting out the demons we carry.

Let's look at Paul's letter to the Galatians to hear what he says about identity, in his often-quoted declaration: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

His statement, which affirms human distinctions while stressing the prevailing truth in the unity of Spirit in Christ, was a clinching argument in the ongoing debate we spoke of before: How Jewish do the Greeks need to be to become Christian? This seems like a funny question to us, but it wasn't to them. The early church needed to figure out how the covenant, which God made with the Israelites, extended to those who were not of Jewish birth, for them to be able to claim Jesus as their Messiah.

There was a strong opposing argument, which stated that Christians had to observe the Jewish laws, and Paul is arguing against that. Paul makes an interesting observation about the purpose of the law and the life-altering impact of the presence of Christ.

Paul's key to understanding the limitation of the law was that the laws do not have the power to make one holy, as only a living relationship with Christ can. The laws, Paul argues, are guideposts up against which we can measure our performance; they can provide food for thought, but there's nothing in them that necessarily turns our heart toward love. They are an excellent tool for self-reflection and provided the Israelites wandering in the desert a set of rules to push back against and ultimately attempt to follow, but there's nothing inherent in them that transforms or necessarily draws us toward holiness or union with God.

However, Jesus does. We cannot encounter Jesus in either our baptism, our weekly Holy Eucharist, in our community, or in the living presence made known in our creation, without our hearts being massaged, formed, tugged, and cajoled into a different place.

This is the life-giving key that Jesus offers us. This is why we are Christian: because with Christ we can grow and change and become more in union with the goodness in the world. And it's made available to us, moment by moment, every time we encounter Christ.

So when Paul said, there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female He doesn't mean there aren't distinctions between people. There are. Everyone's identity is his or her own and that is to be celebrated.

In our modern-day terms, Paul's words might read as this: there are no gay nor straight people, there are no people of color and no people of no color, there are no immigrants or citizens, there are no democrats or republicans, there are no married people and those without, there are only people being united in Christ. There are outward distinctions, but there is no inward spiritual difference.

And this is what Paul says is what matters: only our relationship with Christ. If we have turned our heart toward Christ, if his body and blood feed us, if we are nourished through the care of others, then the only identity that truly matters is who we are in Christ. This is the gift offered to us. If our core identity is one with Christ, then we can no longer be judged by others nor be judgmental of others, we can no longer be ostracized to the margins, nor ostracize others to the margins. Instead, we search for those on the margins and draw them inward, as Jesus did, so they too know they are loved by Christ.

Not everyone believes this. There are some in our society who live in such fear that they cling to the outward differences and cast the others out; they attempt to pile upon those already marginalized their own demons of prejudice and hatred, their own emptiness of their souls onto others to attempt to sap the living spirit from those who live and choose differently than they do. Just like Jesus' execution, it can appear to have worked, but we know that, with Christ, death is never the last word.

Today we will baptize Indie and renew our own baptismal vows, wherein we will affirm our calling to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to respect the dignity of all, and trust that when we do, our world will change.

From the moment I make the sign of a cross on her forehead, Indie will be marked as Christ's own forever. She will become a member of a community, which will not give up on the idea of love. She will be a person strengthened by us and by the power of God incarnate in our world. She will be a person transformed and made holy because of Jesus' presence within her.

We find our true and deepest identity in our baptism and, once we find it, it turns us toward what Jesus is always about: compassion, love, hope, joy, and peace. And, like Jesus we will find it often on the margins where God is so frequently revealed.

Amen.