

1st Sunday after the Epiphany; Baptism of our Lord Sunday – Year C – January 13, 2013

Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY

Based on Luke 3:15-17,21-22 written by Pastor Paul Horn

“Your Identity is Christ”

¹⁵ The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. ¹⁶ John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” ²¹ When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened ²² and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Have you heard about *LifeLock*? This company offers protection against credit fraud, alerts you when they detect that your personal information is being used to apply for wireless services, retail credit, utilities, and mortgage loans. If you become a victim of identity theft while you are a *LifeLock* member they promise to spend up to \$1 million to hire lawyers and whoever else it takes to help your recovery.

Companies like *LifeLock* have grown in popularity in the United States over the past decade. In 2011 over 11 million people in the United States had their identity stolen. <http://www.zanderins.com/idtheft/stats.aspx> Using your name, address, phone number and social security number, thieves will open credit card accounts and sign mortgage contracts under your name, causing untold headaches and time and money.

What is your “identity”? It’s more than just the number on your social security card. Your identity is your personality, characteristics, it’s all the things that make you uniquely and unequivocally you.

As children phase into adolescence they try to figure out who they are in this world. I think that as adults grow and mature even we are trying to figure out who we are in this world. The Holy Spirit will teach us today that you always know who you are, no matter where you are in life, you know, because God knows you, and he knows who you are. He tells you, “You are a baptized child of God.” That is who you are. Your identity is Christ.

In our lesson this morning we follow the ministry of John the Baptist. The Bible tells us that the Holy Spirit called John to be his spokesman. John went out into the wilderness around the Jordan River and lived there. He wore clothing made of hair from a camel. His diet was grasshoppers and wild honey. The bible tells us that all the people from Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside went out to hear John. Not because he was a snazzy dresser or because he taught what they wanted to hear. He preached what they needed to hear. He preached with conviction. He preached the truth of the word of God.

Vs15 our lesson says, “People wondered in their hearts if John could be the Christ.” This was a big deal for the people of Israel. Is this the King the psalm writers spoke of 1000 years ago? Is this the Messiah Isaiah wrote

about 750 years ago? Is this the Savior of the world? Is he finally here? John suffered from an identity crisis with the people.

John clearly identified himself, "I am the one Isaiah spoke of, 'The voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord!' I am not the Christ, but his forerunner." He told them, "The one you're looking for, the Christ... I am not worthy to untie his sandals and wash them." (That was a job reserved for the lowest of slaves). That's how John saw himself. He was the answer to thousands of prayers. He was the fulfillment of hundreds of years of promise. But there was no pride as he carried out his work, but humility. He was unimportant compared to Jesus. When Jesus came to be baptized by John, John tried to deter Jesus, and said, "I need to be baptized by you!" I am a sinner and you are the holy one of God! John knew his place in this world, his identity, and that identity was in Christ. His identity was to point the people to Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Whether it's a top secret spy who's lost his memory (Jason Bourne), a mixed up genius from south Boston (Good Will Hunting), a green ogre with a Scottish accent (Shrek), or a girl (Bella) who wants to become a vampire (Twilight series), we're all drawn to stories about finding ourselves. Our identity, after all, is at the center of who we are. It's how we define ourselves, and it has a great influence over how we live our lives. We end up living out our identities. After all, an ogre makes decisions like an ogre, and vampire thinks like a vampire.

That's why there's so much emphasis in the Bible about our identities. You might even say that the story of the Bible is about one big catastrophic identity crisis. How often have we exchanged our true identity for a counterfeit one? Instead of identifying ourselves with God, we identify ourselves with the sinful world. It's a struggle in this world, to be a child of God, every day we face an identity crisis of sorts, because we are faced with doing what God wants us to do, or going along with everything that everyone else is doing.

God wants us to enjoy sex in marriage, between a man and woman, but we identify ourselves with society which thinks that sex should be enjoyed whenever and by whomever. God wants us to forgive, no questions asked. Instead, we come up with all sorts of excuses why we should not. God wants husbands and fathers to take the lead in the family's spiritual life, but instead we are too busy or too lazy to do it. The bottom line is this: God wants us to identify ourselves with him, and listen to his good and gracious plans for us in his Word, because he intends to bless us when we do. But instead, we allow our opinions and thoughts and behaviors be driven by the winds of this sinful society and our sinful desires.

This is what John the Baptist dealt with when the people came out to the banks of the Jordan River. They were not living as the chosen nation of God, but children of their own sinful desires, children of the sinful society in which they lived.

"Repent!" John said to them. He stands here today and says, "Repent!" "One more powerful than I is coming, and his winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor." I'm sure that none of you has a threshing floor in your backyard. In Jesus' day farmers cut ripened standing grain with a hand sickle, transported the grain to a threshing floor. Usually a hard, smooth open place, on rock or clay, a spot chosen where it was exposed to the prevailing winds. The farmer would lay the grain stalks down on threshing floor, and have his cattle walk over the grain to loosen it up. Workers would take oversized pitchforks (called a winnowing fork)

and toss the grain stalks into the air. The wind would catch the straw and the chaff, blow it away, leaving the grain to fall on the threshing floor.

Jesus is coming to identify who you are. In a sense, he will toss us up in the air to see, “Are you chaff or wheat?” The chaff – the seed covering, useless at harvest time, are the unrepentant. They are those who do not think that their identity with the sinful world sin really doesn’t matter all that much. Jesus says for those who do not repent, who are not sorry for their sins, who do not recognize that they have sinned against God, will be thrown into the unquenchable fire, where no one will be recognized by God.

For those who repent, who do recognize that they have at times identified themselves more with the world than with Jesus, who feel sincere sorrow because of their sins, who in humility look to God, God in his mercy and love points them back to Jesus and shows them what Jesus did for them.

Jesus came to be baptized to be baptized by John. Why? John’s baptism was for the forgiveness of sins, as it still is today. But Jesus had no sins. He was perfect, the sinless one. Why would he come to be baptized? After Jesus was baptized is when he, for the first time publicly preached to the people of Israel that he was the Savior of the world, who had come to win their salvation. That is why the Father spoke from heaven, that he was well pleased with his Son, that he loved his Son. Because the Son willingly presented himself as the one who would carry out this plan. Jesus came to be baptized so the Father could identify him as the one to do this.

Secondly, Jesus stepped forward at his baptism to identify himself with sinners. The prophet Isaiah wrote (53:12) “Surely he bore our transgressions and carried our sorrows.” This is what Jesus came to do. He identified himself with sinners and their sin, by carrying their sins in order that their sins might be forgiven. Jesus was the sin bearer – and began his march to the cross right there, on the banks of the Jordan River. Even though he would not reach the cross for another 3 ½ years, he began to carry your sins.

What love that Jesus has for you and for me, that he would leave his throne in heaven, where he had the greatest esteemed identity in the world, King of kings and Lord of lords, God Almighty! And he came down in human flesh, so that he, the holy God, would identify himself with sinners, and live among them, and teach them, in order to save them from their sinfulness.

In humility, Jesus was not too proud to forgive others, not too proud to identify with my sins on the cross. I don’t know about you, but I am embarrassed when confronted with my sins. How much love that Jesus has for me that he would associate with me and to take my sins on himself and to die for those sins!

What love Jesus has for me that he has acknowledged himself as knowing me in holy baptism. Through the baptism of water and the Word Jesus identifies me with his life, not my life of sin. Through baptism Jesus identifies me with his all sufficient death. Through baptism Jesus identifies me with his resurrection and eternal life. Through baptism Jesus identifies me as his child, and I need never to doubt it, “God’s own child I gladly say it, I am baptized into Christ.” (CWS 737)

This identity is one that we need never worry about being stolen or lost, no need to enroll in a monthly identity protection plan. Who we are in Christ is kept safe in Christ Jesus. He promises us that when he comes with his winnowing fork in hand, to separate the wheat from the chaff, we will fall to the ground as the wheat, and be gathered into his barn, eternal home in heaven, where we will be recognized as God's children forever and ever.

For some people in the world, their identity has to be changed. They have to be moved to a new town, and a new name is given to them, and they are given a new job to work, because their prior life was not safe for them. In a sense their prior life is shredded. Jesus comes with his heavenly shredder and destroys our prior life of sin. Our new identity in Christ changes our life, too. We know who we are in Christ, and through his Word, he tells us how he wants us to live, what kind of people we will be. Since we are children of God, we will live that way. In humility and love we will forgive, we will be the first one to apologize, we will respect God's gift of sex in marriage as a man and women. Husbands and fathers will take the spiritual lead in their homes. As children of God we are different in this world and that's ok, because that's who we are in Christ.

Did you know that identity fraud cost Americans \$18billion in 2011? \$18billion is a lot of money to regain your identity. Jesus spent more than that so that he could call you his child: his lifeblood. This is who you are in Christ Jesus, priceless, precious, forgiven, a baptized child of God. Your identity is Christ. Amen.