

Epiphany IV Year A 2017

The night before my son James left for college he got together with a crowd of high school friends and they all went downtown to a music venue (or so they said). It was the practice of such establishments regarding teens to collect their I.D.'s at the door, and then return them when they left. James, being a little absent minded like his dad, discovered after he had arrived at Sewanee the next day that he had left his driver's license at the club in Dothan. He called us in a panic. We told him not to worry that we would go retrieve it and mail it to him... He said please hurry, because right now I don't have any identity... Identity... that's important.

And since September 11, 2001 having identity has become more important. Without identification one is pretty much a persona non grata. Without an I.D. one can't ride a bus or an airplane... one can't borrow money, cash a check, receive mail, rent an apartment... one can't get a job... without an I.D. one can't vote... persona non grata aptly enough literally means a person 'unappreciated.'

One of the chief themes in the gospel of Matthew is identity. That is why he begins his gospel narrative with an extensive genealogy... a genealogy tracing Jesus' roots back through the patriarchal lineage amid the biblical history of Israel. Matthew names the ancestors of Jesus, and he recalls the history of his people,

from Abraham, the father of Israel to the monarch's, to the deportation to Babylon, and return, and on into the present day... Matthew wants Jesus firmly rooted in the identity of the people Israel... he doesn't want Jesus perceived as some new thing, but as the continuation of God's revelation to God's people... just as God always had... Jesus represents, as it were, a renewed, not new, but a renewed articulation of God's relationship with a people whom God has chosen for God's purposes... In short, Matthew 'identifies' Jesus with the centuries long saga of Israel. For Matthew Jesus is... shall we say, Kosher. Throughout their storied history God has taught the Israelites who they are; who they might become; what their purpose is.... Identity.... And Jesus is the archetype of this renewed identity.

So Matthew is concerned with identity on several levels: First, of course, the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. He uses terms like king, which would strike a nostalgic chord in remembering the ancient history when Israel was sovereign, a kingdom... and then the term messiah... the anointed... Just as the patriarchs and prophets and kings were anointed to bear God's authority... Jesus is the one now... the anointed to bear the tradition forward... and then, the term Son of Man... the literary apocalyptic figure who will usher in the end times which will give away to a new just order... and of course Son of God... again a term used to

describe many of Israel's leaders... the ones chosen to effect God's will among the people... Matthew is leaving no literary stone unturned. He wants to make sure his audience knows that Jesus is the real deal, rooted in what has come before.

And then there is the identity of the people who follow Jesus, the movement... For Matthew that Identity is found in practice, and moreover for Matthew, it is practice that informs belief... If, for example, one wants to understand kindness, one must practice kindness, to understand compassion, one must practice compassion, to understand vulnerability, one must become vulnerable.... That's actually classical Judaism... the law was given to the people at Sinai, so that they would have a practice, a means to know their true humanity... and finally to know God. That is why the Rabbinic tradition refers to the Law as a gift... a gift of identity, a shared identity with their God who created them.... So in the mix of Matthew's narrative around identity, the identity of God Godself is at issue... On the whole this gospel is about what God is like, what Jesus is like, and what God's people are like... a shared Identity.

Now this is not just peculiar to Judaism... Homer's *Odyssey*, one of the earliest western literary works we know about, is all about identity... Odysseus wanders the known world until he finds home... It is a journey of trial, of

maturation, a journey of finding one's true self... and it's not just a story about one man, but a people. This epic was written during the emergence of the Greek city state... a new world order, an artifice of the human imagination... the city state, an outward and visible sign of the identity of a people.... A people who order themselves democratically; a society in which justice is the highest authority.

So identity is what we practice as a people... Our identity is not what we say, or what we say we believe; it is what we do... An interesting exercise would be to describe the American identity... What do we practice as a people? We are a nation of the rule of law; Equal justice, whether exercised ideally or not... equal justice is a hallmark of our nation; we are a democracy... people have the right to vote, people have a say in how and by whom we are governed... we are industrious, innovative, entrepreneurial; we also have a history of racial scapegoating, imperialism, and violence... Until yesterday we were a nation that welcomed the immigrant... in truth, our legacy, the American dream is founded on the immigrant. So let me go on record, to close our borders is antithetical to scripture... Hebrew scripture and New Testament. Welcoming the stranger, taking care of the refugee is a gospel imperative. My point is that our identity as a

nation, as a church, you name an institution...Identity is only as true as our practice.

In today's reading we encounter Jesus in the narrative block known as the Sermon on the Mount... Here Jesus is teaching, we are told by the writer, teaching his disciples and the crowds that are following him about identity... what he is like, what they are like, what God is like: The passage we just read is called the 'beatitudes', blessings... So because I took Greek for a whole summer.... Just enough to be dangerous... I'm going to give you my paraphrase of this passage... a passage very familiar to us... maybe this will shed some new light on these words... words which perhaps have become ossified over time: So here goes:

Blessed, that is, the ones who God loves, are the ones whose hopes have been crushed; the kingdom of God comes because of them;

Blessed, that is, the ones God loves, are the ones who lament the trials of the world, its evils and injustices; God suffers with them.

Blessed, that is, the ones God loves, are the ones who are courageous, judicious, and patient; because there will always be a reckoning.

Blessed, that is, the ones God loves are the ones who have a passion for justice; because justice is always a win/win.

Blessed, that is, the ones God loves, are the ones who are kind; because kindness engenders kindness.

Blessed, that is, the ones God loves are the ones who are true to themselves, honest in short; because being true is seeing the truth.

The ones God loves are the ones who cooperate instead of competing and fighting; those are the ones God can use in the world.

God loves the ones who risk trouble because their quest for justice and truth; because that is the way kingdom people act.

God loves the ones who risk derision and scorn from their neighbors just because they serve the cause and speak the truth; they will do this because truth hurts.

And there are those who refuse to hear it.

These so-called beatitudes in Matthew and Luke, which were very possibly said by Jesus himself, are not mere platitudes... not mere sentimentality... these are words that teach us who we are... who Jesus is... and what God is like... Those three things in the power of the Spirit coalesce... that is, our identity, and that of Jesus, and that of God Godself are one identity... an identity that is manifested in practice... these beatitudes, these blessings are what God dreams for God's world... they are the future, the future already taking root in the present day... we

see signs all around us... folks who have fought for marriage equality; people who fight for racial reconciliation and civil rights; those who fight against laws that disadvantage the poor, and the disenfranchised... the women's march standing up for the rights of women in a world that still does not consider them as equals. There are other signs of God's dream becoming reality..... the signs of God's kingdom embodied in enlightened practice.

In God's world that comes surely, there are no persona non grata... there are none that will live unappreciated in shame and indignity... In God's world all will share in the wealth of God's abundance; In God's world all will be safe; in God's world, that comes surely, all will experience God's healing touch... Why? Because that is who God is... that is God's identity... to say that God is unknowable is to abdicate our true humanity... God is fully known in every act of love. God's identity is love in the flesh... love in practice.... and brothers and sisters; that is our identity as well... They will know who we are by our love. God sees us as people who love, bearing the endless possibilities of Love... and if God sees us that way... then so be it.

