

Lent 1, Year A, 030914
All Saints Episcopal Church

In the name of God, who creates us, saves us and blesses us. AMEN.

Good morning, and welcome to the season of Lent.

My father was one of 8 children; he had 3 brothers and 4 sisters. They were Sam, Audrey, Marjorie, Edward, Eugene, Mary Alice and Ruth. Daddy was Frank. When he was born, his oldest brother, Sam, was already married, and out of the house, and just a few years later, his oldest sister, Audrey, was also married and gone. Daddy became an uncle at the age of 7. By the time Daddy was grown and married and he and my mother had us (my brother and sister and me), there were lots of first cousins and even second and third cousins for us to get to know and learn their names.

It was hard to figure out who was who in the family for a few reasons: 1) we didn't live near any of them, so we only saw them if we made a long trip to see them; 2) my aunt who had the most children (5 of them) also lived far away from the family, and we saw them so infrequently that I have to confess that, to this day, I still get some of them mixed up! The third reason it was hard was because some of them had nicknames, and some of their spouses had nicknames, which meant learning two names eventually for all of them!

For instance, Aunt Audrey was called Sister by all of her siblings. That meant we called her Aunt Sister, which didn't always make sense. Her husband's name was Paul, but everybody called him Slick. They had a son, also Paul, but they called him BooBoo. Everyone called my Uncle Edward, "Put," except for his wife, who called him Eddie. Nobody could ever tell me how Uncle Put got that name. Uncle Eugene was called Gene, which was obvious and easy to remember, but his wife called him Robert, which was his last name, and I never understood that!

My mother only had one brother, Drew, whose wife's name was Margaret. We called her Aunt Peggy, but I remember being absolutely stunned to realize that my uncle called her Meg. "Why in the world are we calling her by a different name?" I asked Mama. I guess I had thought there was so much difference between Daddy's family and Mama's family, that her family didn't do such things as giving everyone lots of weird names. (Although, for a time, we called my brother Gladys, but that's a story for another time!)

Why am I telling you about this? Because I want us to realize that how we know who we are -- our identity in life -- is almost entirely based on our relationships. When I would say, "so Gigi is Mama's mother, and Grandma is Daddy's mother" and "Uncle Put is Daddy's brother and Uncle Drew is Mama's brother," I began to know who I was in the Hageman / Robert family.

Beyond that, I can't be an aunt without my nieces and nephew, or a nurse without patients, or a priest without congregants. Our jobs can give us *some* identity, but it is, in the end, not so much what we do as who we are while we are doing what we do that really matters as far as our identity is concerned.

When we realize this about our identities, we have a key to understanding this week's readings from *Genesis* and *Matthew*. Both are temptation stories, which are often explained as ones concerning power and status, but looking at the stories in terms of identity gives us a new perspective.

In *Genesis*, the serpent tempts Adam and Eve with the opportunity to create their own identity apart from their relationship with God. "When you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." In other words, who needs God, anyway, if you can 'be like God' all on your own? The attempt to change their identity doesn't work, of course, and some say we have been paying for it ever since.

In *Matthew*, the Spirit sends Jesus into the wilderness right after his baptism. While he is there, he is tempted by the devil. (Now, I know I don't have to explain that the devil is not a man all in red with horns and a pitchfork, right?) OK. So there are three temptations: turn stones into bread, call on angels to keep you safe, and the promise of power and dominion, but they can all be seen in terms of identity.

What the devil does right away is to try and challenge the identity that Jesus has just been given by God at his baptism: "This is my son..." He says to Jesus, "If you are the son of God..." you can do such and such. He calls Jesus' identity into question, and tries to steal Jesus' God-given identity and replace it with an identity that he creates for Jesus.

It's not that Jesus isn't hungry out there in the desert. But he doesn't need to do magic tricks to make the hunger go away, as the devil would have him do. He will

feed thousands with just a few loaves and fish soon, and he will feed all of us with the sacred meal with which we remember him whenever we gather together.

It's not that Jesus couldn't call on God to protect him if he were to throw himself off the top of the Temple, as the devil would have him do. He will endure the jeers and taunts of others while trusting in his relationship with God to the end on the heights of a Roman cross.

And it's not that Jesus doesn't choose to be the leader of all the world, as the devil would have him be. People had been waiting for that sort of Messiah for ever. Instead, Jesus offers them and us the kingdom of heaven, a place for all God's creation.

Jesus is able to turn his back on the devil's temptations because he is secure in the knowledge that he is the son of God, that he is beloved. He doesn't have to do anything to prove himself to God.

Jesus isn't the only whose identity the devil has tried to steal. In our world, we are constantly bombarded by temptations that appeal to our sense of insecurity and inadequacy. Every day, we hear the message that we are not enough. Not skinny enough, not smart enough, rich enough, pretty enough, clever enough or popular enough. If we buy this kind of car, or use this kind of toothpaste, or sleep on this kind of mattress, we will be acceptable. Otherwise, we don't deserve any respect, much less love.

But here's the thing: that's a lie. It's all a demonic attempt at a type of identity theft far worse than the type we are trained to fear from computer hackers.

Yet Jesus offers us a way to turn our backs on these temptations the same way that he did, by asking us to put our trust in God's relationship with us. We are God's children, God's beloved. Just as the Spirit came upon Jesus at his baptism, the Spirit also comes upon us. Just as the voice from heaven claimed Jesus as God's beloved son, words spoken at our baptism make it plain that we, too, are claimed and love by God. And there is nothing we can do that will make us unworthy in the eyes of God.

You are worthy. You are acceptable and accepted. You are loved.

Thanks be to God.