

“Who Am I?”

I John 3:1

Sermon notes from the Pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
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I found this cartoon in an old New Yorker Magazine. Two angels are in strolling together in heaven. One says to the other, “I don’t want to let being dead define me.”

This is a sermon in seven parts about how do we define ourselves.

I.

Last Sunday was the thirtieth anniversary (April 7, 1994) of the Rwandan genocide. During a period of around 100 days, Hutu militia began killing Tutsi and some moderate Hutu and Twa groups. Something like one-million people were slaughtered with rifles and machetes. Sexual violence was pervasive. This in a country that is 95-percent Christian. Christians were killing Christians.

Cardinal Roger Etchegary, visiting on behalf of the Pope, stood in the aftermath of this slaughter and asked, “Are you saying that the blood of tribalism is deeper than the waters of Baptism?”

The answer, apparently, was yes. Religion didn’t matter as much as blood.

But it should.

If we define ourselves in terms of our baptism, we define ourselves as united in the waters of Baptism. If we define ourselves in terms of our baptism, we affirm we are ingrafted into the body of Jesus the Christ. In baptism we affirm we are one family of the same household

The cardinal asks a theological and practical question: Who are we? Is our connection to God more important than our connections to tribe, to politics, to party, to race and clan? The cardinal’s words underscore a timely message for today, when much divides us: UConn vs. Perdue, Iowa vs. South Carolina, tomaaato vs. tamato, Russia vs. Ukraine, Palestine vs. Israel, Biden vs. Trump. The divide between Hutu and Tutsi is on the mend, but not so, not yet, for other divisions in our modern world.

It’s a critical question: are we united in the one body of Jesus? Are we valued, beautiful, and blessed parts of God’s creation? If the answer is yes, why this discord? Why this division?

Does tribal blood run deeper than the waters of Baptism? How do we define ourselves?

II.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was in a German prison. His guards liked him and sought after him for advice, for prayer, for comfort. He had friendly relations with his guards. But he was also terrified and felt very much alone. He felt like he was two people. The trusted pastor who had it all together, and someone riddled with self-doubt on the verge of falling completely apart.

So, he asks in his poetry, Who am I?

Our answer to that question matters. How do we define ourselves? If I am “nobody,” then my life doesn’t matter. If I belong to God, if I’m part of the body of Jesus Christ, my life—and every other life—is sacred.

Bonhoeffer famously ends his poem "Who Am I?" (which I've shared many times with you before) with these words: *Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.*

If we belong to God it changes everything. I don't live just for myself because I belong to someone who loves me and calls me and expects to use me in this world.

Does tribal blood run deeper than the waters of Baptism? Who am I? How do we define ourselves?

III.

Julian of Norwich said in the midst of the Black Plague that she knew she belonged to God, and she believed God's purposes for her life and the lives of all creation would work out. This theological understanding of her small life within the vast providence of God's unfailing care gave her the confidence to say, even in the midst of grave hardship, "All will be well, all will be well, all manner of everything will be well."

This affirmation comes from deep trust in God's mighty care.

This winter, our daughter-in-law's father died suddenly. It has turned our family upside down. Life is even more fragile than we imagined. It is difficult, after great loss, to affirm Julian of Norwich's words, but we are trying. We trust God. We trust that God is working God's purposes out. We trust God is healing our wounds and using us, in turn, to heal the world. We believe with our heads (if not completely with our hearts), "All will be well, all will be well, all manner of everything will be well."

Do we define ourselves as secure in God's hand, or are we dust in the wind?

How do we define ourselves?

IV.

The writer of the first letter from John (1 John 3) says that we are children of God.

John uses the word "father" to describe the intimate relationship we have with God.

For many of us, God as "father" (or, even, heavenly parent) may be troubling language that conjures metaphors that aren't helpful. Many of us don't have father or parental figures we love or who love us. Fathers or mothers have abandoned or hurt us.

John's point, I believe, is that God is not some far off clockmaker-god who cares only at a distance. John's point is that we are intimately known and loved by our creator, and we are, by definition, in relationship. We are whole-heartedly members of God's family. We are beloved children. This can't be earned or taken away. It is a gift. We belong.

We belong. And so does everybody else.

During the sacrament of Baptism, we often share these words, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are."

How do we define ourselves? Who are we? Who are we in relation to God?

This is an important question.

Remember the words of our prayer of confession this morning drawn from the Belhar Confession: O God, though you have entrusted Your church with Your message of reconciliation in and through Jesus Christ, we confess we sometimes align with systems of sin and death.

How we define ourselves determines with whom we align ourselves. Are we aligned with good or evil? Are we going to build up or tear down?

V.

I'll close with two images.

The first is the eclipse. Much of the world put on funny glasses and looked up last Monday afternoon. This event on many levels reminded me who I am and how Jesus encourages me to define myself. I was reminded of how big the cosmos is and how small I am. I was reminded what a cool world this is and how amazing a creator God is. The eclipse gave me perspective. Who am I? I'm a small, small part of a much bigger whole. Nevertheless, I am part of it. And that's pretty cool. I was wearing goofy glasses, standing next to Joe Lundy, looking up, saying, "Wow, wow, wow" over and over again.

The second image has to do with Destin Lembelembe. Many of you know Destin. He came to this church from the Congo when he was in elementary school. He usually wears a wide, wide smile. We became friends on a Go and Serve Mission Project in 2018. After that trip, he always called me his brother. I'd see him at the Farmer's Market and he'd wave across the distance, and shout those words I love to hear: "My brother!"

I phoned him this week. He's living in a western suburb of Chicago. He greeted me predictably and winsomely with those familiar words: "My brother! How are you?" Gregarious Destin calls me (and probably everybody) his brother.

I'm a father, a husband, a son, a friend, a child of God, and—Destin will never let me forget it—I'm a BROTHER. I'm his brother and he is mine. Alleluia.

VII.

John reminds us that we are children of God, which makes us siblings. The Hutus had forgotten this in the Rwandan civil war. In 1994, they defined Tutsis as enemies not as brothers and sisters. We do the same to others whenever we speak or think poorly of another or when we align ourselves with those "systems" of sin and death.

But we are related, we are beloved, and God calls us to love the world like Jesus loved it, by the power of the Spirit, with humble courage and great joy. *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.*

AMEN.