

WHO AM I?
Ephesians 2: 13-22

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If you ever took a Psychology 101 class, or read a book about the stages of human development, you might remember that a man named Erik Erikson identified eight basic stages of human emotional growth. The fifth stage is adolescence, and the main work of adolescence is answering the question of identity. “Who am I?” So it is normal, and healthy, for teens to “try on” different personalities, seeing what seems to fit best, as they differentiate themselves from their parents and become their own full individual selves.

But we don’t stop asking, “Who am I?” when we leave adolescence. I hear it asked all the time. I hear it asked when a grieving spouse says, “Who am I if I’m no longer a wife...or a husband?” I hear it asked when a newly-retired adult says, “I’m not sure who I am when I’m no longer employed full-time.” If you have been a full-time caregiver and that role ends, you feel lost. When the nest is suddenly empty, parents sometimes struggle with the question of purpose.

The question of identity is not just settled once. We take on and off different roles throughout our lifetimes, and each time we go through a major change, it takes a while to adjust.

“Who am I?” “What is my identity?” is a question that is asked and answered throughout the Bible. Sometimes God gives people new names as a way of marking them as new people with new identities. “You used to be Abram and Sarai,” we can read in the book of Genesis. “But now you will be called Abraham and Sarah. You have a new job to do. You will be the parents of a new nation, with more descendants than there are stars in the sky.”

In the days of the early church, not everyone was on board. The new Christians were considered rebels, renegades, and they were viewed with suspicion by many who still clung to

the old traditions and rules. One of them was a man named Saul who was so outraged by the changes the Christians were proposing that he actively persecuted Christians, trying to put an end to this new movement. It all changed one day when he received a vision and a message. He became a Christian immediately. He stopped persecuting and began using his passion to build churches instead. As the story is told, people gradually stop referring to him as Saul and begin using the Roman version of his name, Paul. It is as if his behavior and identity have changed so dramatically that a new name is needed.

This past winter, Doug and I saw the movie, "Lion" in theaters. It is now available on DVD in many places. If you haven't seen it, I highly recommend it. If it weren't based on a true story, I don't know that I would recommend it. It just would seem too farfetched, too unbelievable. But it's true...and I will try not to include too many spoilers in this sermon. The story begins in a very remote, very poor rural village in India where a young boy lives with his mother and siblings. He is about four or five when the film begins. The boy gets lost one day and ends up, after a harrowing journey, in an orphanage in Calcutta where he is eventually adopted by a family in Tasmania, in Australia. He has a happy normal childhood there, is raised as an Australian, and begins college. While at the university, he meets some other Indian students who begin to ask him about his heritage, about what Indian food he likes, and he begins to have flashbacks to his childhood. He feels somewhat ashamed and embarrassed that he hasn't claimed his Indian identity, then - the more he remembers - he is haunted by the fact that he left behind a family who doesn't know where he is, doesn't even know whether he's dead or alive.

He becomes obsessed with finding his family and his home village, and he does so via the internet, especially google earth. I won't ruin the movie for you by telling you what happens at the end. It is a powerful story about the search for identity, the powerful urge to answer that question, "Who am I?"

Even though my personal story has virtually nothing in common with the character in the movie, "Lion", I found it had deep resonance for me. How many of us feel perfectly at home in the world at all times? Most people I know, myself included, have been in circumstances where we've asked, "Who am I?" "Where do I belong?" "Why don't I fit in better?" "Why does everyone else seem more comfortable in their own skin than I do?"

I remember first moving to Bay Village when my son was four and I was pregnant with my daughter, and that first fall sitting on the sidelines watching my son's soccer game. I didn't know any of the other parents and I wasn't sure I'd ever fit in with them or be accepted by them. I remember the doubts that flitted through my mind. "I'll bet I'm the only one here who lives in a rental house; everyone else probably owns their home. I probably have less money than everyone else here." "I'll bet they all know each other already and probably don't want more friends. Some of them probably grew up here and have known each other all their lives."

If similar thoughts have never occurred to you, I'd be surprised. It may happen at a board meeting, or a cocktail party. One person recently told me it happens to him at church. "Everyone here probably knows all the bad things I've done," he said to me in my office. "I've screwed up, and a lot of people around here know about it. I don't know that I should even come to church." It breaks my heart when I hear things like that, because we try so hard to project a sense of acceptance and unconditional love here, and I assured him, with everything I had in me, that that wasn't the case. People are not talking about him behind his back. In fact, people are happy to have him as part of the community. That conversation taught me something important, though. We can't assume that people feel accepted. We have to go out of our way to communicate that acceptance. I'm pretty sure that no one at that Bay Village soccer game was thinking anything negative about me at all; the insecurity was all in my head. But no one reached out to me either. If we want the church to be different, if we want the church to be a place of extravagant welcome, we need to be on high alert. Watch for the people who

are new. Don't bombard them, but welcome them. Reach out if you sense that someone might feel uncomfortable. Notice the people who might need extra reassurance that all people are welcome here.

The letter to Ephesians says, "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and members of the household of God." In God's love we have an identity and a home. We have a place to belong, where we are always welcome.

God's love is our foundation, a solid place for us to stand. When everything else in the world appears to be changing so fast, when the institutions we have counted on appear fragile, God's love remains firm. It is a promise on which we can count and believe and stake a claim. God doesn't promise that life will be easy. God doesn't promise that we won't face hardships and challenges; in fact, the Bible tells us that we all will. What God DOES promise is that through it all, we have a firm foundation, a place to stand, and someone who will be standing beside us.

When Jesus is baptized by John in the River Jordan, the moment after he emerges from the water, a voice comes from heaven saying, "Who is this? This is my child, my beloved, in whom I am well-pleased." That message was not just for Jesus. It is God's message to each of us. We are God's children, each of us, called by name, loved unconditionally. Next time you need to hear that loud and clear, come into this sanctuary, touch the water in the baptismal font, and listen for God saying it to you.

Listen to our scripture for today in Eugene Peterson's words from the Message version of the Bible: "Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders. He treated us as equals, and so made us equals. Through him we both share the same Spirit and have equal access to the Father.

That's plain enough, isn't it? You're no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You belong here, with as much

right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home. He's using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.”

We belong. We all have a place here. Thanks be to God.