

Pentecost 12, proper 16. August 27, 2017. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland.
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Isaiah 51:1-6, Psalm 138, Romans 12:1-8, Matthew 16:13-20

Have you noticed that “Identity” is the latest buzz-word in the political life of our country? One contemporary commentator uses a fishing metaphor to talk about how to engage with folk you don't know or think differently than you. Interestingly, one commentator used a very similar fishing metaphor to talk about how to engage with folk you don't know – or perhaps do know, and are aware that they think differently than you. When you're fishing, he said, you cast your line into the water, and if you're able to hook a fish you reel it in carefully. If it struggles, you give it some slack, gradually coaxing it to shore. Even then, he said, you're not always successful. But, he continued, standing on the shore, berating the fish for its moral failings and then demanding it swim to shore and docilely allow itself to be netted, is never going to work!

There's a profound truth in this. I've found personally that telling others what you think is wrong with them, or telling them exactly how they should change, is a very ineffective way of convincing them you have their best interests at heart; it's certainly no way to make a connection!

Identity. That's at the core of this week's readings. In fact we began with that theme last week in Isaiah's reading. There, Isaiah talked about the future identity of the returning Israelites as they stood downcast amid the ruins of the Temple. He said, remember how you came to be who you are. That identity called them to make the new Temple a “house of prayer for all people.” BUT it could only become that inclusive house if they were committed to going out and finding and ministering to the lost and the downtrodden of all nations. “You can't just build it and expect them to come” was Isaiah's message; “you've gotta go out there and show them by the way you treat them that this new Temple is for them!”

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus consistently talks AND does exactly this - speaking and acting; inviting and embracing. But it wasn't a temple he was building, but a new community. His message, though, was the same as Isaiah: “Don't expect that people will just show up and want to join simply because you've formed a new community. Your identity as faithful people requires more than that; it requires that outward-facing orientation that seeks out those in need and invites them in. Our identity as Christians – both as individuals and as a community – is predicated on that outward orientation. And people are only going to come – and stay – if we treat them with respect.

This week's readings are all about forming and embracing that identity – what things are necessary for this new community to come fully into being. The collect – our “prayer of the day” – sees unity as a core principle of communal identity. Without that unity, we'll be unable to show forth God's power.

Isaiah, in calling to mind for the Israelites Abraham and Sarah, is inviting the Israelites to “remember who you are.” The remembering will enable them to work for the Glory of God to restore all that had been broken down. “*If you can live out of this identity,*” he says, “*if you can embrace this common goal in unity of mind and spirit and act on it by going outward to embrace and invite the downtrodden, then the wilderness will be turned into paradise, the parched desert*

into a verdant garden, and joy and gladness will be your lot.”

Having heard last week of the beginnings of a ministry of reconciliation, this week Matthew adds another identity building block as he reports Peter’s great declaration of Jesus’ identity. Jesus, in return, says something often misunderstood: that on the *rock that is Peter’s declaration about Jesus’ identity*, a new, unbreakable community will be built.

And Paul talks about the nature, the identity of this new community, and the characteristics of the individuals who make it up.

What Paul has to say is particularly important – central, in fact – for any Christian community – and it’s all about identity – and it ties directly to the story I began with about the call of Peter. How we represent our God, how we face outward, is predicated on what we think about ourselves and about the world outside. Paul’s reminder is that we can’t face outward until we’ve got our own spiritual house in order! The way we live as Christians – the values we hold central – shouldn’t be ones we find in contemporary culture but rather should be ones we find in the heart of our faith. Don’t be conformed, be transformed; only in this way can we be truly open to God’s will.

Then Paul responds to a 1st century core value that’s still with us today: pumped-up self-worth. We should “*not to think of yoursel[ves] more highly than you ought to think.*” Or, to put it another way, humility is the foundation for community. Out of that humility will come mutual respect; out of mutual respect will come a commitment to the shared goals of the kingdom, because in the end nothing we do in this community should be about “us;” it should only and always be about how we advance the kingdom here and now, in this place.

Paul underscores this vision by returning to the metaphor he used in 1 Corinthians 12, re-purposing it’s details for the Roman situation. We all have gifts that can be used for the building up of the kingdom; each of us is different and the same is true of our gifts. Only when we set aside any sense of superiority, or privilege, or entitlement, and work together as a team, will we be successful. That’s why, in 1 Corinthians, Paul reminded that community that “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you’, nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’” I must not say to anyone, “I’m so good at this that I can do it alone, without your help!” We cannot say to each other, “my skill-set is so comprehensive that I don’t need others to stick their noses in what I do.”

But we do, don’t we?!! I’m getting better at catching myself when for some reason I think someone else is encroaching on my patch, but I still screw up. We all do. Thank God – thank you, Jesus! – that we’re not damned to hell for it! Yet its still true that healing the hurts we foist on each other takes away the energy we need to commit to sharing the Good News of the Kingdom.

We’re shown our identity, today. Unity is at the core. Humility and mutual respect are building blocks. Reconciliation and forgiveness are tools we can give to each other. And reconciliation, forgiveness, mutual respect and humility are the ways we must then approach the very chaotic

and wounded world outside this place. So don't go yelling at "the fish" in our culture that their evil, and how could they say and do what they've said and done, and then expect a favorable response - an opening up - a possibility of relationship! Reconciliation and community aren't created that way, but through humility, other-centeredness, and a commitment to the unity of the Body. And that's our responsibility.