



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

I Am Because We Are
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 12, 2021
The Rev. Paul McLain

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Archbishop Desmond Tutu loves to tell this story: "There was once a light bulb which shone and shone like no light bulb had shone before. It captured all the limelight and began to strut around arrogantly quite unmindful of how it was that it could shine so brilliantly, thinking that it was all due to its own merit and skill. Then one day someone disconnected the famous light bulb from the light socket and placed it on a table and try as hard as it could, the light bulb could bring forth no light nor brilliance. It lay there looking so disconsolate and dark and cold – and useless. Yes, it had never known that its light came from the power station and that it had been connected to the dynamo by little wires and flexes that lay hidden and unseen and unsung.'

Archbishop Tutu uses this story to demonstrate that the distinctive identity of each person depends on her or his connection to God and other persons. We need each other to discover who we are. Even Jesus needs others to discover who he is.

In our Gospel passage from Mark today, Jesus's first two questions to his disciples are: "Who do people say that I am?" "Who do you say that I am?" As he begins his long march to Jerusalem to confront the powers there, Jesus seems to be hearkening back to Moses who, beginning a similar trek to confront Pharaoh, asked of God at the burning bush, "Who am I, that I should go to Egypt to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" Or perhaps Jesus is unraveling his identity with the God who answers Moses, "I am who I am." Regardless, when Jesus asks questions about who he is, it prompts the disciples to think about who they are and what they are about.

Peter boldly asserts that Jesus is the Messiah. But his use of that title tells us more about Peter's expectations than Jesus's identity. He sees Jesus as a political liberator, such that Peter will, at long last, have a seat at the table of power. When Jesus explains the sort of Messiah he will be – one who suffers, one who is rejected, one who is killed, Peter can't handle it. He takes Jesus aside and rebukes him. And Jesus links Peter with Satan. But notice what Jesus does not do. He does not dismiss Peter from the disciples. On the contrary, in his very next act, Jesus invites Peter to join him as part of his inner circle to climb with him atop the mount of Transfiguration. Jesus knows that as he is discovering and revealing his own identity, the disciples are still figuring out who they are. And they can only do that as they keep walking together.

Desmond Tutu introduced many of us in the Western world to the African concept of Ubuntu. It means 'each individual's humanity is ideally expressed in relation to others' or 'a person depends

on other people to be a person.’ But the best translation of it is: ‘I am because we are.’ Ubuntu not an appeal for uniformity. On the contrary, it celebrates our quirkiness.

Archbishop Tutu wrote: ‘I have gifts that you do not have, so, consequently, I am unique – you have gifts that I do not have, so you are unique. We find that we are placed in a delicate network of vital relationship with the Divine, with our fellow human beings, and with the rest of creation. We are meant then to live as members of one family, the human family exhibiting a rich diversity of attributes and gifts in our different cultures as members of different races and coming from different mileus – and precisely because of this diversity, made for interdependence.’

Archbishop Tutu was tested in these views by facing the oppression of apartheid in his native South Africa. He saw and led his followers to see their oppressors as fellow children of God. He believed the first step, and perhaps the only step, to ending apartheid was to humanize the oppressors in the eyes of native South Africans and that a sense of common humanity would form. It worked, and it changed history in a profound way.

Jesus told his disciples and the crowd that if any of them wanted to be his followers, they would need to take up their cross. Sharon Ringe writes: “‘Taking up one’s cross’ is not accepting just any burden, but rather being prepared to put one’s life on the line for the sake of Jesus and the Gospel. The disciples are indeed called to be prepared to share in the fate of the one they follow, and to recognize that it is there that true life is found.”

The cross is where we find our true identity. When a child or adult is baptized, the priest anoints his or her forehead with Chrism oil in the form of the sign of the cross, names the adult or child, and says, ‘You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.’

In many ways, the cross is a symbol for Ubuntu. The four points of the cross can be seen as arrows pointing outward to embrace and connect Jesus and all humanity in all directions, south, north, east, and west. The four points can also be seen with arrows pointing inward to acknowledge that we each bring unique gifts to Jesus and to each other, and that we are somehow more because of each gift, and more importantly, because of each person.

I wonder if Peter heard the last part of what Jesus predicted about his fate. He said after three days, he would rise again. Peter would later come to discover his identity in a risen life that challenged him to raise up others. One of our Holy Week prayers describes how God, through the passion of Jesus, makes the cross, an instrument of shameful death, to be for us the means of life. It is the cross of hope that forms us into who we are. And, Archbishop Tutu adds, ‘We also need other people and they help to form us in a profound way.’

Today, we kick(ed) off our fall adult formation program with the themes of Identity, Relationship, and The World We Live In. Identity is a good place for us to start. Who are we now, both as individuals and as Calvary, after a year and a half of being apart much of the time? How has this strange time of social distancing and interacting through technology changed us? In a lot of ways, these changes have been positive. Many of you have shared how you have ‘been to church’ more over the last 18 months than ever before because of the accessibility of our online services. How have Jesus and others formed us during this time? In the midst of all the death and

sorrow we have seen, what does it mean now to be shaped by the cross? Who are we now, and what now are we called to be about? Where do we now find our hope?

Archbishop Tutu teaches us that we each have a unique place in our new delicate network of interdependence, an interwoven quilt of caring and encouragement. As we add every last one of our quirky strands, we discover stitch by stitch, 'I am because we are.' *Amen.*