

Who Am I? A Question of Identity

What is your identity? Who am I? Who are you?

At one level we can all pull a handful of cards out of our wallets. They all have our names and identification numbers, sometimes they include our pictures. Mine includes cards such as: my driver's licence, my health card, my social insurance number, my credit card, my memberships cards

We might also be identified by where we live, either on the right side or the wrong side of a dividing line; in many Canadian towns it was which side of the railway tracks you lived on. Perhaps where I was born. It might be my education, my job or my hobbies.

We are also identified by our family – our parents, our spouse or partner, our children, our siblings. My name may say something about me; it may tell you whether I am part of the in-group or the out-group.

There are so many ways to describe ourselves or for others to identify us by. Identity and how people are known by the communities that they belong to will play a big part in our readings today.

The Pharaoh, the new king, the most powerful man, is unnamed. We know little about him except that he is afraid. He is afraid of this community of outsiders, the Israelite people, the descendants of Jacob. He is scared because he views them as more numerous and more powerful than the Egyptians. He is afraid that they will fight against them and escape, leaving the Egyptians with no one to do most of the hard labour, particularly building their cities. So terrified that he identifies, names this group of people, who arrived as food security refugees, as a nation; for the first time in the bible.

In contrast, we do learn the names of the two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. They were Israelites, from that same feared nation, and apparently really good at their job. They were the midwives that everyone wanted, Hebrew and Egyptian alike. Pharaoh gives them so much respect that he speaks with them in-person rather than sending messages. And when they give their excuse for not killing the Israelite baby boys, Pharaoh accepts it and does not punish them.

We recall from last week that Joseph arrived as a slave and would later become the right-hand man of the previous Pharaoh and de facto leader of the nation. An outsider who became an insider.

Today we meet Moses, who was born of Levite parents. This will be important in the future when Moses is to lead the Israelite people out of Egypt. The Levites were the tribe that was not given any land but given the task of looking after the Ark of the Covenant and they were the leaders of the sacred traditions. Many, if not all, the men had priestly roles in the community. This Levi heritage will give Moses some of the authority that he needs to lead the people, make him an insider.

Of course, at the time of his birth, being an Israelite was not good for ensuring a long life. Moses is found in the basket in the river and adopted by the daughter of the Pharaoh. This new identity will ensure that he lives, is healthy and gets to grow up strong and educated.

Being of mixed identity will not always work in Moses favour, but that is a story for another week.

Some identities are inherited; others are given by the community. Jesus and the disciples have walked about 50 kilometres north from the Sea of Galilee to Caesarea Philippi. Jesus asks them who people think he is to which they respond with a list of some of the great prophets of Judaism. Then Jesus asks who they think he is.

This is more than a pop quiz to see if the disciples understand. There may be other dynamics at play.

A few years ago, the Diocese of Huron was partnered with the Diocese of Umtata in South Africa. When they visited, they introduced us to the concept of Ubuntu.

In the book *African Proverbs: Wisdom of the Ages*, David Abdulai writes, “In traditional [African] life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries. He is part of the whole. The community must therefore make, create, or produce the individual; the individual depends on the group.”

This view contrasts greatly with modern western culture that identifies with Rene Descarte’s idea “I think, therefore I am.”

Ubuntu would say “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.” This view would be consistent with the understanding of identity in Jesus’ day and locale.

Jesus, in asking the question about who he is, may be looking to his community to confer on him the identity that he will be known by. He already knows who he is, but he is looking for the community to grow in its understanding and acknowledge his identity. Jesus does not use the identity of Messiah until after Simon gives it to him in this conversation.

Interestingly, Jesus also confers on Simon another identity of *petros* or rock. One writer quipped that he was not sure if the description of rock was due to his stolid character or rocky hard-headedness. But now after his confession that Jesus is Messiah he is now going to have to live up to the highest meaning as the rock upon which God will place other stones, will build a new community.

This is a pivotal occasion as both Jesus and Simon Peter affirm the other’s identity and prepare for their respective ministries ahead. Jesus will be transfigured and then enter Jerusalem for the culmination of his earthly ministry.

Peter will mature, learn to teach and preach with power (Acts 2), and go on to become one of the patriarchs of the church.

Jesus and Peter help each other assume their rightful identities. This is the principle of Ubuntu: “I am because we are.”

Thanks be to God for the identity that we are given and share. Amen.

Readings: Matthew 16:13-20
Exodus 1:8-2:10