

Sermon from the Installation Service of Bishop Kennetha J. Bigham-Tsai, February 19, 2023
Remembering Who We Are - Matthew 16: 13-18
By Bishop Kennetha J. Bigham-Tsai

It was the summer after 4th grade-at Girl Scout Camp. There was a girl there who seemed determined to make my life miserable. She did that through constant teasing and name-calling. She called me everything but a child of God. And, her words went particularly deep, because, at that time in my young life, I did not yet know who I was. And I allowed her hurtful words to define me.

I imagine that some of you may have been in that place at some point in your lives. Someone has tried to define who you are. And their words have gone deep. They have hurt.

Friends, we have never been alone in this dilemma of having to define identity in the face of those who would define it for us. Jesus dealt with this. People tried to define him: some negatively—calling him a disciple of Beelzebul (Mt 12:24) some more positively, comparing him to one of the prophets—Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist, (Mt 16:14). None of these descriptors quite fit. And it didn't matter because Jesus knew who he was.

In fact, in our passage in Matthew, Jesus' own self-identification is in his question to his disciples. He essentially gives them part of the answer to his identity in the framing of the question. *"Who do people say the Human One is?"* (Mt. 16: 13).

Jesus knew himself to be the "Human One"—the son of Mary and Joseph—fully human. He also knew himself to be God's Son, and therefore, fully divine. Peter gets the divine aspect of Jesus's identity, when he answers, *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,"* (Mt 16: 14).

This designation was not original to Peter. It had been given to Jesus earlier, at his baptism in the Jordan. There, the Holy Spirit had descended upon him like a dove, and God had spoken from heaven, *"This is my Son, my Beloved; in him I am well pleased."* God declared Jesus's divine identity—as God's only Son—at Jesus 's baptism.

Bishop and theologian Will Willimon wrote a book a number of years ago, entitled, *Remember Who You Are*. In this book, Willimon provides an answer, in three words, to who we are as Christians. He writes, simply, "You are baptized."¹

Willimon continues, *"The way for a Christian to find out who he or she...is to come to the font and look into those graceful waters.* The reflection of yourself which you see there is who you really are."² In this framing, Christian identity is tied to baptism. Remembering our baptism is key to remembering who we are.

I remember my baptism distinctly. I was seven years old. It was on a hot Sunday morning at the New Hope Baptist Church—a little white clapboard church on East 16th Street in Austin, Texas. That day, the deaconesses dressed us kid's, including me and my brothers, in thin white choir robes covering our shorts and t-shirts. They paraded us into the chancel area and lined us up.

Now in my church, baptism did not involve sprinkling. It was by full immersion. The tank was under the floor of the chancel, covered up by red carpet, just like the carpet in this sanctuary. They had already rolled back a section of carpet and filled the tank with water. My brothers and the other kids went first, and I watched each of them be dunked under the water three times. When it came my turn, I was so scared that the deaconesses standing on each side of me had to grab me by each elbow and propel me down the three steps into that cold water. I looked up at my pastor—the Rev. O.T. Arnold—a tall man with a chiseled face—his hair plastered back with pomade. He was dressed in waders and a long black robe. In my seven-year-old eyes, he looked like Dracula.

I stood there shivering, while Rev. Arnold said some words. Then, he said my name, and put one hand on the back of my shoulders and the other hand on my forehead. He pushed me back into the water. *"I baptize you in the name of the Father,"* he boomed. I came up sputtering. He pushed me back again. *"In the name of the Son!"* His voice reverberated like a wrecking ball hitting the air. I came up again, gasping for a breath. Then, he pushed me down a third time. *"In the name of the Holy Ghost!"* I came out of that water thankful that Rev. Arnold had not managed to drown me.

Now, it would take me years to understand the significance of what had happened beyond not being drowned. And, over the course of my life, I did come to understand. I came to understand that, through the waters of baptism, we come, into a new family—the family of Christ. Through baptism, we take on a new identity in Christ, (cf. 2 Cor 5: 17). The old is gone, the new has come. We become a royal priesthood—the Body of Christ, sent into a broken world as hope.

I came to understand who I was as a part of the Body of Christ. And, eventually, I made a conscious decision to join a particular branch of that Body. I joined The United Methodist Church. And I learned that, as United Methodists, we have distinctive Wesleyan understandings of our identity.

We are a people who center grace.

It is God's grace that woos us into a relationship with Christ. It is God's grace that makes us right with God through Jesus's justifying work on the cross. It is God's grace that sustains us and nurtures us, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, perfects us in love.

We are a people emersed in grace, washed in grace, upheld by grace, embraced by the grace of God, and called to be extenders of that grace to the world.

We extend God's grace through sacrificial love: first by grounding ourselves in the sacrificial love of God that leads us to obedience in our spiritual lives of prayer, and study of God's Word, and fasting and worship. Out of lives empowered by our love of God, comes the sacrificial love of neighbor—which leads us to share with our neighbors the Good News of our faith in Jesus Christ. This is sacrificial love which leads us to be exhorters and preachers and evangelists of the Gospel message of hope.

Loving neighbor then powers our commitment to missions. It is love of neighbor that fuels our work in the Ukraine and our relief efforts in Syria and Turkey in the wake of this month's devastating earthquake. It is love of neighbor that fuels our mission work in Central and South America, in the Philippines, in Africa and Europe, and around the world. It is love of neighbor that fuels our work here in Iowa in local churches, in prisons, on college campuses, in hospitals and throughout our communities.

And it is our love for neighbor that powers our commitments to justice. The United Methodist Church is unique in holding together personal holiness with social holiness. We are unique in placing Social Principles at the center of our self-understanding. We care about living out the dictates of Micah 6:8 *to do justice, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God*. **We do this out of our love of God and neighbor and out of our commitment to extend God's grace to the world.**

Our focus on grace and love does something else friends. It leads us to practice the open table. All are welcomed at the table of God's mercy. This has applied, traditionally, to how we deal with communion. Anyone, who feels so led, can come to the table, and take communion in The United Methodist Church.

But this understanding of an open table goes beyond the sacrament. It also applies to our life together. Practicing an open table means that we make a place at the table for everyone. Because in Christ's Church there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, Black nor white, male nor female, Queer nor straight. We are all one in Christ Jesus. Christ invites us all to the table and calls us to make space for everybody.

Now that also means this-those of you who are more traditional in your understandings of the faith, there is a place at the table for you. Those who are more progressive in your understandings of the faith, there is a place at the table for you. Those who are middle of the road or who defy such descriptors all together, there is a place at the table for you.

Now I know that we are in a season of disaffiliations and disruption. But when we get past all of this, The United Methodist Church will continue to be a church whose members include a rich variety of cultures, identities, geographies, and beliefs. But friends we can be a church that despite our differences can make a place at the table for everyone.

This is the church Wesley envisioned when he said, *"Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike."* We may not be of the same opinion, Wesley said, but can't we be of the same heart? Can't we have hearts centered in love? Because the Church, friends, is about love, not litmus tests. The Church is about grace, not gatekeeping. God is calling us to be a gracious people centered in love.

People have asked me about my vision. And I have the same answer. I've been here for just weeks. And, right now, I am focused on just listening to you, because I don't have any shiny new ideas to offer that are more exciting than getting to know who you are, and how we will live out our identity together as United Methodist Christians, and as a people of grace.

Because, out of our identity as grace-filled Christians, will come direction for how to live into our mission to **inspire, equip, and connect communities of faith to cultivate world-changing disciples of Jesus Christ**. Out of our identity as grace-empowered Christians will come direction for how to live out our vision to **see God's hope for the world made real through faithful leaders, fruitful communities, and fire-filled people**. We must first claim and celebrate our identity, and we must ***BE UMC***.

You remember who we are don't you? We are the baptized. And we are United Methodists. Help me spell it.

U-Unifiers in Christ Jesus
N-Navigators of his love
I-Incubators of the faith
T-Tillers of God's mission field
E-Exhorters of the Good News
D-Drum majors for justice.

M-Manifesters of God's Mercy
E-Edifiers of the Body of Christ
T-Toilers in the Kin'dom of God
H-Healers of a broken world
O-Overcomers of despair
D-Deliverers of hope
I-Imitators of Christ in the fullness of his joy
S-Seekers after his righteousness
T-Testifiers to God's grace revealed to us in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Iowa Annual Conference, remember who you are!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

¹ Remember Who You Are: Baptism, a Model for Christian Life, William Willimon, Upper Room Books, Nashville, TN, 1980, p. 108.

² Ibid.