

January 17, 2021 (Focus: John 1:43-51; Second Sunday after Epiphany)

How much of our lives are wrapped up in answering one key question, and how much of the struggles we have had in our country as of late are wrapped up in the same question: the question of identity. Who are we? Who do we say that we are? Who do we show that we are?

Our personal identity is oftentimes wrapped up in our work: we identify with our profession or our job or our training, although that identification gets us into trouble when we lose or change jobs, or when we retire. Do we cease to know ourselves when we change or lose jobs or retire? It is a source of struggle for many.

Our personal identity is oftentimes wrapped up in how others perceive us, especially our parents, for they had an early chance to imprint their beliefs on us long before we even could identify what was going on. So maybe it was early on, or maybe after some struggles, that your identity was proclaimed: the good child, the bad child, the artistic one, the non-artistic one, the leader, the follower, the messy one, the neat one, etc. Sometimes it is these early ways in which we are identified that are the hardest ones to shake.

Jesus throughout his ministry had to work against how others would identify him, perhaps more so as he was beginning his ministry. He was, after all, just the son of Mary and Joseph, just a carpenter from Nazareth in Galilee. Just a minor preacher from a small town, tramping about in the wilderness; a nobody really. And then there were these people he recruited to be his so-called disciples: fishermen, tax collectors; we know their professions almost better than we know their names. We can almost hear them call out to Jesus when he invites them to follow him, "I am *just* a fisherman." "I am *just* a tax collector." "We are nobodies, why do you want to recruit us to be your followers," we can imagine them thinking, even as they were also thinking, "who *is* this guy?"

Jesus' disciples would struggle with trying to figure out both his identity and theirs. They would question who he was, even as they would tell him that they believed him to be the Son of God. And they would doubt him when Jesus would identify them as healers and preachers and advocates. And this problem of self-identity would cause his followers troubles over their ministry, especially during times of struggle and challenge. They would question Jesus again and again about what it all meant as they got closer to Jerusalem and the challenges presented to Jesus from the Pharisees and scribes, for they still didn't fully understand who

Jesus was and who they were as his followers. They would deny him and desert him in his greatest hour of need, for they doubted their courage and strength and faith.

We too struggle in our lives when we are not strong in our sense of identity. We hear these days, as we struggle with this pandemic, people saying “I am not strong enough,” “I am not resilient,” even as they are managing to make it through a pandemic. Almost none of us has ever had to make it through a pandemic before, and we have made it through 10 months of it, and yet we doubt we are strong or resilient, and we suffer because our self-identity doesn’t match our actions.

Some struggle as they identify themselves as “not enough.” “I am not enough” is am the saddest things to hear a child of God to say or think about themselves; God doesn’t create “not enough.” Yet people with struggle with this misidentification of ourselves. They offer grace to others, but cannot except it themselves.

We even see this in institutions, such as the church. Churches who say about themselves, “we are too small to make a difference in the world, we are too poor to do anything but keep the heat on and the doors open on Sunday morning, we are too scared to speak out and maybe lose members or risk losing new members.”

There is Jesus, he finds Philip and said to him, “Follow me.” How much did he know about Philip; what did Jesus see in him? He was just an ordinary sort of person, yet Jesus said, “Follow me.” And then Philip went and found his friend Nathanael and said in essence, “let’s do this, let’s follow this Jesus fellow.” But Nathanael thought he already knew who Jesus was, “He’s just that guy from Nazareth, why should we join ranks with him, after all, can anything good come out of Nazareth?” And what did Philip do? Did he give a long speech about who Jesus was? Did Philip provide Nathanael with Jesus’ credentials, his resume or bio? No, Philip simply said, “Come and see.” Decide for yourself. See Jesus. Walk with him. See how he interacts with others. Hear what he has to say. See how he lives. In other words, what others say about Jesus is not as important as what his own words and actions tell us about him.

And as Jesus welcomes Nathanael into the fold, he offers up to Nathanael a sense of his own identity: “here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael gladly accepts the compliment, it seems, without question, or maybe

Nathanael was laughing at what he thought was a joke or some boosting of his ego to get him to join. But then Jesus tells him, I know you. I knew you even before your friend invited you to join us. Not a magic trick, not some psychic phenomenon. I know you, Jesus tells Nathanael. Just as he let the others know, in a way. You think all you are are mere fishermen or tax collectors. You think all you are are mere peasants, the common poor that are only good to be worn down by life and poverty and under the domination of the few. But you are more than all of that. You are ones who are called to greater things, to healing and sharing the good news. You are beloved of God. You are the ones worthy of encountering the holy.

In John's gospel, this story of Jesus calling Philip and Nathanael comes after he calls his first two disciples, one of whom was Andrew, who was Simon Peter's brother. It was only after spending the day with Jesus that Andrew goes and tells his brother Simon Peter that "we have found the Messiah" and Simon Peter joins the early disciples in following Jesus. It is only after he spends some time with Jesus that Andrew seems to recognize that Jesus is the anointed one. It is what Jesus said and did that helped Andrew identify him as such.

It is a cliché these days to say that Jesus doesn't call the equipped, but he equips the called. That was the case for the earliest of his disciples, fisherman and tax collectors and others who had no idea how to heal or preach or advocate or be prophets or feed the hungry, etc., but they learned along the way, failing sometimes but in the failures learning more about themselves and about who they were and whose they were.

The story of the calling of Jesus' disciples is an opportunity for us to wonder at our own identities. Do we recognize ourselves as the ones whom Jesus calls, the ones that he invites to see that all he says and does is as a mediator between heaven and earth, a mediator between us and God? Do we recognize ourselves as ones whom Jesus calls because he sees in us gifts of the spirit in such abundance that we can help him in his ministry of bringing good news to the poor in body and spirit? Do we recognize ourselves as ones Jesus calls to be leaders, advocates, prophets, ones who care about and for each other and all creation? Not just a few, but all of us called, to use the variety of gifts of the spirit we have been blessed with, in whatever special way we are called at this moment on our spiritual journey.

And no, Andrew and Simon Peter and Philip and Nathanael had no idea of the fullness of what they were being called to, as it evolved over time. All they

understood in the moment was that they were called, and they were enough. So too, we are called, and we are enough, for such a time as this. What gifts we bring and how we use them, that evolves in the fullness of time. For the work ahead, we are called, and we are enough, with God's help.

Let us pray.

John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Creator God, we seek your holy presence in this moment, we desperately need your holy presence in this moment. We continue to face great difficulties, and wonder what the next few days and months will bring. We are a divided people. We are people who yearn for more than what the world seems willing to be. We are on edge, as instability waxes and resilience wanes. We are becoming numb to the shocking numbers sick and dead in this pandemic. There is too much hatred, too much ignorance, too much violence, too many talking and too few listening. There is too much hunger and homeless and unemployment, too low wages and too little connection. We are tired, we are angry, we are worried, we are weary, we are wondering when relief will come.

We are in an in-between time, and in-between times make us fearful. We are trying to put what has been behind us, yet the road ahead is uncertain and we are unsure of what might come. We are holding our breaths, awaiting what will be, praying that it will be better for us all. Remind again, gracious and merciful God, that you are in this time of the interim, leading us forward. Remind us again that no matter where we are, no matter what is happening, that if we are rooted in your love and your ways, that we are planted in good soil, from which goodness will flower and bear fruit.

Ever Gracious God, pour out your love and your healing powers upon our world in need. Pour out your love and your healing powers upon us, and upon all those in need of healing in body, mind, and spirit. Grant all in need an experience of your renewing compassion and care, especially...

Moment of silent meditation...

Gracious God, grant us peace in our minds and in our hearts, as we struggle with being citizens of the world and as we seek to be accountable to each other and all creation. We trust that you intend peace for us, for we have heard it in the words of our teacher and spiritual guide and savior, the one we call the Prince of Peace, who taught us to pray to you, saying, Our Father...