

**PENTECOST 2C SERMON for June 19, 2022 at Grace Lutheran, Victoria**  
**TEXT: Luke 8:26-39 and Galatians 3:23-29**  
**Brief sermon on identity, for World Refugee Day (June 20)**

Who are you?

If someone asks who you are, you normally give your name. If a policeman pulls you over, they'll ask for your driver's licence, to confirm your identity as well as your driving qualification.

But of course, our identity is much more than that. It's everything about us that distinguishes us from others: our height, our weight, our outward appearance, including skin colour. When I was a kid, my black hair and darker skin tone made me look like one of the children of the Italian family across the street, and when I played with the little Italian girl across the street, we were often mistaken for brother and sister.

But our identity is made up of such a diverse combination of characteristics that each one of us is unique. For instance, each of us has fingerprints that are slightly different from everyone else. Of course, that's now old technology. These days the police use genetic profiling or genetic "fingerprinting" as they call it, to detect whether a person was present at a crime scene or not.

We all began to develop our identity in our childhood and teens, mostly from our parents and guardians, but also from friends and relatives, school teachers and peer groups. Their view of us and opinions of us shaped our identity, and the way we saw ourselves. We were blessed if we were treated with love, affection and respect, and wounded if we were treated with anger, neglect and unjust punishment. How they treated us affected our view of ourselves – our self image, and that self-image became part of our identity.

Beyond that, we had to figure out "who we are" on our own.

It was by going to church that I learned that the most important part of my identity is my Christian identity. That's more important to me than my citizenship, or job or field of expertise, or financial position, or

life-history, or reputation, or anything else. I'm a Christian above all else.

As a Christian, I know that all my past sins and wrongs are forgiven, and that, through God's sacrifice of His Son Jesus on the cross, I am clean and pure and holy.

So I'm a saint! Martin Luther strongly emphasized this: that although by nature we are sinners, through Christ we have become saints.

This holiness, this sainthood, was officially conferred upon us through our Baptism into the body of Christ, and it's reaffirmed every time we eat and drink the body and blood of Christ sacramentally, in the Holy Communion.

The status of Christ is a free gift from God to us. So we can justifiably call each other Saint Brigitte or St. Andrew or St. Robert or St. Barbara. Actually, there's a city in California called Santa Barbara! It's a good name.

Furthermore, at any time of the day or night we can confess our sins and failings and misdeeds and receive God forgiveness, full and free. Today at the beginning of this service, we did this in a sacramental way. Speaking by the authority granted by Jesus to his disciples, I officially pronounced the forgiveness of all your sins. Your slate is clean. You can start all over again, all over again. You have a new life ahead of you.

Our Second Reading is a passage from the letter to the Galatians chapter 3, 26-29, one of my favourite passages: ". . .in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. [So] there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, (says Paul) then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the (ancient) promise."

St. Paul is saying that, no matter how diverse we may be, in nationality or status or class or sexuality or whatever, those identities are far less important than our Christian identity. It's as if the church around the world is a new "nation" whose sovereign is Christ alone. According to the New Testament, we are the new Israel, and we will inherit and receive all the promises that God originally made to Israel!

I've said this many times before, and I love to repeat it: at the foot of the cross the ground is all level. In the eyes of God, we are all equal because of Christ. We're baptized and united to Christ forever, so our differences must never separate us.

St. Paul wrote his letter to the Galatian congregation to remind them that although they had very little in common, they were still one body in Christ. And if they put their Christian identity first, then they'd be able to deal with their differences. . . through negotiation, compromise, whatever it takes to (quote) "preserve unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace".

Our Gospel Reading this morning is about a man whose identity is super-conflicted. That sometimes happens to people with mental illness: they think they are God or Napoleon or Hitler – anybody but themselves. This Gerasene demoniac was being torn apart by powers of evil that invaded his spirit like an army, so that his sense of self was lost.

He begins shouting at Jesus to stop tormenting him. But Jesus hadn't said anything; he just got too close. Notice that the Jesus, the Master, offers no reply to the prayer of those inhabiting demons, but puts a quiet suggestive question to this unhappy man. "What is your name?" That's all Jesus asked him. "What is your name?" But Jesus' question seemed only to stiffen him up and make him angry. I can picture him with his fists tightening and his eyes bulging: "MY NAME IS LEGION, FOR WE ARE MANY." But Jesus is actually asking him to recall that he had once had a human name, with all its memories of human fellowship. This was a stage in the process of his recovery, in that it helped to disentangle the confusion

of his spirit, the ball of conflict between himself and the many demons which were causing his misery. His reply (My name is legion) was apt! He was saying, “I have the full array of the Roman legion, all six thousand powerful soldiers within me.” In this one grim symbol, this mentally-ill man was naming the wild, uncontrollable impulses of passion and paranoia that had infested his soul.

What happened next? The demons in this man begged Jesus to let them go into a herd of swine who ran down into the lake to their death. And the man was free of them. And here’s what verse 35 says: “The people came out to see what had happened, and . . . they found the man from whom the demons had gone, sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid.” Mmm.

This incident, like many others in the Gospels, shows the necessity of being on the side of Christ. Praise God, that you and I are joined to Christ forever, by our Baptism and our faith!

1st John 3, verse 1 is another favourite verse of mine: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.”

I’d like to close with two stanzas a poem called, “When I say I am a Christian”:

When I say "I am a Christian",  
I'm not claiming to be perfect;  
My flaws are too visible.  
But God believes I am worth it.

When I say "I am a Christian",  
I do not wish to judge anyone,  
I have no authority.  
I only know that I am loved.

Amen.