

Who do you say that you are? Really?

Let us pray. *Come Holy Spirit and empower us to truly received Jesus into our hearts in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

With the recent popularity of the Survivor shows, several southern TV stations are joining together and are planning to do their own show, entitled: Survivor Southern Style. The contestants will start in Alabama, travel over to Georgia and on to South Carolina. From there they will head up to North Carolina and over to Tennessee. They will then proceed down to Mississippi and Louisiana, finally ending up back in Alabama. Each will be driving a pink Volvo with New Jersey license plates and large bumper stickers that read: I'm Gay, I'm a Vegetarian, NASCAR Sucks, Go Yankees! Hillary in 2008, and Deer Hunting is Murder! The first one that makes it back to Montgomery, Alabama alive, wins.

The question of our identity and whom others perceive us to be is probably more pressing that it ever has been in recent times. Not since the inquisition-like era of Senator Joseph McCarthy (I had rather be dead than red) has the matter of who you are been of such importance to this nation. We may laugh or cry at the likes of a southern style survivor show, but the sad truth of the matter is that for a nation which prides itself on political correctness and inclusivity, we have become a nation that increasingly scrutinizes its citizens: who they are and what they have been up to. Does the terror, which has beset this country in the aftermath of 9-11 really warrant the security concerns that harass one at the airport or the Canadian border? How do you feel about the prospects of congress requiring a national identity card for each of us? And, has any of this really made us safer?

Yet, for as damning as one's identity might be to one's well-being if it is perceived as a threat to national security, it is perhaps perversely comical to realize that same identity can be so fragile, if not transportable. I am speaking here of the phenomenon of identity theft — of people stealing our identities in order to draw upon our bank accounts or illegally make purchases with our credit cards. Our identities, it appears, can be reduced to a mere commodity in the market place. With the computerization of everything in our lives from tax returns to knowing the location of the family dog, it has become quite easy for those of unscrupulous money-making motives to swipe who we are and use that asset for purchasing power. We may wonder, then, which indeed is the greater threat — a bunch of jihad-radicals, wanting us dead, a government intent upon insuring our security at all cost, or a market place, which sees our identity as the currency of doing business.

In our gospel this morning Jesus raises the question of identity. Whereas He once asked of his disciples: "*But who do you say that I am?*" and Peter answered: "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*" (Matthew 16:15-16), Jesus now in this earlier chapter of Matthew, in a manner of speaking, asks his disciples, "Who do you say that you are." This is no mere let's-get-better-acquainted question on Jesus' part. If we take the matter of properly identifying ourselves prior to boarding an airplane seriously and if we seriously take the matter of not having our identities stolen from us in the marketplace, then with what gravity are we to answer the question of our identity when it comes to where we are going to spend eternity? For you see, that is the reason Jesus wants to know, "who it is we say we are". How then, can we confidently know if we have the proper identification which will allow us to pass into eternity? Is it enough for us to say that we have accepted Jesus as our Lord and Saviour? Is that what

must be stamped on our passport in order for us to cross over into heaven?

Recently, I read about an encounter between Brian D. McLaren, a Los Angeles pastor, and Sam, an Irish Jew. Though Sam voluntarily watered the church's freshly planted saplings, he had never attended one of Brian's services. Regardless, Pastor Brian wanted to thank him for taking care of the young trees. The following conversation then transpired.

Sam said to Brian: "Let me tell you why I'm not interested in your [Christian] religion. I was once listening to one of your evangelical preachers on the television, and he said that if Hitler had said a little prayer [saying] that he accepted Jesus into his heart or some such nonsense, then all the wrong he did wouldn't matter, and he'd go straight to heaven."

Brian thought to himself: "I could imagine a TV preacher saying this sort of thing to emphasize the unfathomable range of God's grace, but I could also hear how, for Sam, as a Jew, this kind of talk didn't make God sound gracious. Instead, it made God sound careless about the suffering of the Jewish people. It trivialized the Holocaust and reduced Christianity to a cheap ticket to heaven."

Sam had more to say, however. He told Brian, "I have a son. A few years back, he decided to go to Israel and volunteer for the Israeli army. One night, he and his fellow soldiers were at a border crossing, when a Palestinian man came up. The other Israeli soldiers, not Sam's son, started harassing the fellow, pushing him around, calling him names. Finally, they pushed him down and started kicking him. Then one of them took out a knife and said he was going to circumcise the guy. You know, if he wanted to live in their land, he should be circumcised."

At this point Sam's son had had enough. He pulled out his rifle and pointed it at his fellow soldiers, telling them they were doing wrong and that this man shouldn't be treated this way, that he was human, too. Well, they put Sam's son in jail for a long time, but then they had the trial. It was all in the papers and in the end Sam's son was vindicated. In fact, he got a letter praising him for doing the right thing. Sam, then pointedly asked pastor Brian: "Would your God send my son to hell because he never said, 'Jesus, save me,' but let Hitler go to heaven for saying the magic words? Is that what you believe, like that TV preacher?"

We might wonder whether Jesus, some two-thousand years earlier, may have anticipated such a question, a question which raises the issue of who we are, when He said: "*Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.*" This verse seems obvious enough. Our passport to heaven requires more than just calling Jesus Lord. It requires us also do the will of God. But is it as simple as that? In the very next verse Jesus said: "*. . . many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?'*" Surely, it must be God's will to do such things. Yet, Jesus replied, "*I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.*" Are we then to believe it is not enough to say we are Christian as well as do Christian acts? How then are we to be saved?

In these two verses Jesus has introduced us to individuals who apparently believe themselves to be genuine disciples. They can appeal to their charismatic activities to prove it, but nonetheless are labeled as evildoers by Jesus. How many of us sitting here today call ourselves Christians? How many of us here can offer a list of the Christian things we do: singing in the choir, going to church, working with the youth, teaching Sunday school, visiting the sick, giving money to the church, preaching sermons, Bible study, and whatever else you may wish to add. Yet, Jesus seems to be saying that just because we call ourselves Christians and do Christian things does not mean we are saved. Kind of scary, when you think about it. You might have thought to yourself, "Well, I don't know when I'm going to die, but, I do know I am going to heaven." Maybe, not. Could we be deceiving ourselves?

A certain minister decided that a visual demonstration would add emphasis to his Sunday sermon.

Four worms were placed into four separate jars. The first worm was put into a jar of alcohol, the second into a jar of cigarette smoke, the third into a jar of chocolate syrup and the fourth worm into a jar of good clean soil. At the conclusion of the sermon the minister reported the following results: the first worm in the alcohol was dead, the second in cigarette smoke— dead, the third in chocolate syrup—dead and the fourth in good clean soil— alive. So, the minister asked the congregation — what can you learn from this demonstration? An elderly lady in the back raised her hand and said” “As long as you drink, smoke and eat chocolate, you won’t have worms.”

Again, the question to us is what must we do or who must we be in order to be guaranteed a passport into eternal life? What must our identity be in order to escape that hell, which Jesus speaks of in Mark 9:47-48, “*where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.*” We don’t want to have those hellish worms.

I am a fan of the CSI programs on television. CSI stands for Crime Scene Investigation. In the Las Vegas program two weeks ago, one of the members of the investigative team was kidnaped and held for a million dollar ransom. Neither the police department nor the city had that kind of money in their budget to spare — kind of like Erie County. So, Catherine, one of team members, went to her father for the money. He owns several casinos. At first she talked about how much the police department had done for him and how it would look good for him to give the department the million dollars. He replied to his daughter, “Catherine, I don’t need good PR. If you want me to give you money, ask me as my daughter and not in your official police capacity.” Though Catherine and her father are not on the best of terms, she accommodated his wish and asked for the money as his daughter and not as a public official. The television camera immediately captured the visible difference on her face. When she asked for the money as a police officer her face was cold and hard-looking, but now as she asked for the money as a daughter her face brimmed with emotion. Her father responded by giving the million dollars. The gateway to eternal life is one’s heart. What Jesus wants from us is our hearts, just as Catherine’s father wanted that from her, and that means being in relationship with Jesus. It is not what we call ourselves or what we do that matters. It is our being in relationship with Jesus that counts. That’s who we are to be — an intimate friend with Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. Jesus wants our behaviour, our good deeds to proceed out of the confidence we have in God’s grace toward us through Jesus and not in pursuit of that grace. We are to do our religious stuff because we love the Lord and know He loves us and not because we hope to earn his favor. The latter discloses that we do not know the Lord and that we have not allowed the Lord to know us.

I want to pause here a minute and try a little experiment. You might want to close your eyes as we do this, but you don’t have to. So, if you will, imagine with me that Jesus is standing right there in the middle at the altar rail and He starts walking towards you. Now, for effect I’m going to do the walking but obviously I am not Jesus. As Jesus walks towards you, try putting your thoughts aside. Forget about the bills to be paid, the struggle it took to get to church this morning, the argument you had with a child or spouse. In other words, try not to think. Just try to envision within your heart Jesus getting closer and closer to you. What are you feeling, as He moves to stand right in front of you. Don’t let my walking away from you lead you to believe Jesus has passed you by. He’s omnipresent and can be in several places at once. So, what are you feeling in your heart as Jesus stands in front of you? Fear, nothing, confusion, discomfort, an awkwardness, peace, joy, sadness. Maybe anger. Are you mad at Him for something that happened? Maybe gratitude for a recent blessing. What are you feeling there in your heart. Not what are you thinking, but what are you feeling?

You see, it is your heart that Jesus wants. He wants to be right there in your heart: the very place I’ve been talking about. You may have discovered during this little experiment that you and Jesus have

some unfinished business. In a moment when you come forward for Holy Communion (Remember that as Anglicans we believe Jesus' real presence is there in the bread and the wine.) you can continue talking to Jesus, or if you like, our prayer team will be available to pray with you during Communion in front of the secretaries' office.

This past week I had one of the best laughs I have ever had reading the *Buffalo News*. In the business section there was an article entitled "Race emerges as subtle undercurrent in Scrushy Trial." The by-line was out of Birmingham, Al. where Richard Scrushy, the CEO of HealthSouth Corp. was being tried for allegedly overstating the corporation's earnings by \$2.7 billion dollars. (Now, that's cooking the books.) Here's the funny part. One of Scrushy's lawyers, a black man, compared Scrushy's plight (Scrushy is a white man) to what conditions were like when the black lawyer grew up in segregated Montgomery, Al. in the 1950's. Did you hear that? Scrushy is white and his black lawyer (I know both these guys) has compared Scrushy's treatment by the government, the prosecution, to the way whites used to treat blacks in the South. It might help you to know that in 2003 Scrushy and his wife had begun attending the mostly black *Guiding Light Church* and that he gave the church more than \$1 million.

In his closing arguments, Scrushy's black lawyer recalled not being able to drink from water fountains or use public restrooms in department stores. Addressing the jury this lawyer said, "Courts with a jury like you changed all that." He then went on to say that Scrushy had been wrongly targeted, adding that more change was needed to end such abuses.

Preposterous!, you say. Ridiculous, absurd! (Here's the newspaper article.) How could a white man ever be mistaken for a black man? Who could ever get away with such a charade? Well, that my friends is the nature of the society in which we currently live — a society that can call white, black and black, white. This same kind of thinking is about to destroy the Episcopal Church — a Church that says sin is not sin, but a god-given gift.

As preposterous as this is, I will tell you what is even more preposterous, more ridiculous and more absurd: that a Holy God could ever look at you and me and think that we are his sons and daughters, that we look like his righteous Son, Jesus Christ. Now, that's truly preposterous and truly absurd. Do you see that? Yet, it is only because of God's preposterousness, His grace, that unwarranted and unmerited favor towards us, that we have any hope of being allowed to board that plane which will take us to heaven. You see in the kingdom of God you and I are the terrorist. We steal, we lie, we cheat, and we kill. You and I are threat to the well-being of everyone, including ourselves. But, when we truly invite Jesus into our hearts, God no longer sees us as a threat. We become someone else. We don't even look like ourselves any more. We begin to look like Jesus, who is our passport to eternal life.

Being a child of God in Jesus Christ is an identity born out of relationship with Jesus which no one can pretend to or take away. Its the only identity, which will get us into heaven. And, that means Jesus must be living in our hearts. Is He living in yours? Who do you say that you are?

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