

Proper 16, Year A

A Question of Identity. Who am I? Who are you? Who is the other?

When I saw the Exodus passage for today's sermon, I giggled. Like a little kid on Christmas morning. I was gleeful! I chose this exact passage for my final project in Old Testament last year. Instead of writing a research paper fourth quarter, we had to do a storytelling assignment. I chose this passage because of all the tricky women. Now, it was still a research assignment. I researched the characters and other versions and interpretations of the story, creating my first ever annotated bibliography. The final assignment was to tell the story, from memory. Mine was great. I went full-on Southern.

I will not be doing storytelling for you today. Sorry. But that research made me so excited and eager to use this little story to talk about our human story. Fast forward to this year, this summer, and this divisive, divided time, and I feel obligated to use this story, as well as the gospel, to talk about compassion and maybe even courage. There's this tension in both readings between how the world sees and how people of God are called to see. I feel that same tension when I read the news. We all are quick to see as the world sees. We tend to divide and segregate, circle the wagons, mistrust anyone who doesn't fit in. God, though, has a different vision, one rooted in the incarnation. God created this world and all that is in it, and God created *each of us* in God's own image. To see people as God would see them, then, is to see others as relation, as family, as part of the self. Once you see the other as part and parcel of God, and thus directly related to you, compassion sneaks in where division used to dwell. The shift in vision is not easy. It never has been. But that shift is what we need: we all need to see as God sees and let compassion in, even when it hurts.

"Who do people say that the Son of Man is? Who do you say I am?" Today's gospel is about identity. Jesus asks the disciples about his identity as perceived by others and by the

disciples themselves. “People” say that he is something they’ve seen before: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. But Peter declares that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

Peter’s answer reveals his faith in something he cannot see. Jesus says to him, “For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.” This answer forms the basis for Peter being “the rock” on which the church will be formed. Understanding the true identity of Jesus marks Peter as a worthy foundation for God’s continuing work in the world. To be the church, we have to be able to see as God sees. Taken along with other Peter stories in the Gospels, this story gives me a lot of hope. Peter’s faith is imperfect; he begins to walk on water and then sinks beneath the waves of doubt. Peter is witness to the Transfiguration and all he can say is, let’s build some tents! This same Peter, the Peter who has doubts and who misses the mark sometimes, this same Peter has enough faith to become the Church because he can see the divine in Jesus. Peter sees beyond what is obvious to what *is*- Jesus’ true identity. That hopeful answer comes out the blue and straight from above- Peter for a moment sees as God sees.

I hear in this exchange Jesus speaking to how we identify others in asking how he himself is identified. The Exodus story also speaks to identity, albeit in a different way. It speaks to how the way we perceive others directly affects how we treat them; identity is at the root of how we treat the other; shared identity is the root of compassion.

Exodus is about identity too, albeit in another way... Pharaoh is selling a false story about who the Hebrew people are. He peddles fear that these people will outnumber the Egyptians and fight against him. The irony of this fear shocks me: a relatively small band of immigrants in a strange land. Immigrants whose ancestor Joseph saved the Egyptians from drought. Immigrants who helped build the country. This new pharaoh, however, has a poor memory. His lack of memory affects his own sense of identity; previous pharaohs saw themselves as powerful enough to be

generous to the Hebrews. This new fellow sees in the Hebrews a possible adversary, a growing threat on the margins of his society, a people to be worked to death or exterminated.

As I mentioned earlier, this passage has a lot of tricky women, for lack of a better term. The midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, are the first two. They show how to live in hard, dangerous, scary times. If Shiphrah and Puah were around today, we would probably call them activists- they make change from within and take risks for their own people. They see the humanity of their own community and do what they can to help. When enlisting the midwives fails, Pharaoh decrees that all the male Hebrew babies be thrown into the river. The midwives resist the cruelty as best they can, even though it is insufficient to stop Pharaoh. They have compassion.

And then we have Pharaoh's daughter. Some bible scholars read this story and see pharaoh's daughter as foolish for being tricked into paying a child's own mother to nurse him. Poor silly princess, basically. This interpretation seems to ignore moment when pharaoh's daughter knows that the baby is a Hebrew and chooses to save him. Thankfully that is not the only reading. In my preparations for the storytelling assignment, I recalled a book I had seen two decades before (at least) at the Shrine Mont bookstore. It was called *But God Remembered*, and it was midrash-ancient commentary on the Hebrew scriptures- centered around women in the Old Testament. I remembered loving what it said about pharaoh's daughter as a kid, so I sought out the book. Of course VTS had it. I think VTS has almost all the books.

What I found was so exciting. For one thing, in the midrash pharaoh's daughter has a name: Meroe. Meroe knows that the two women standing nearby are the baby's mother and sister, and she chooses to give him to that woman as a nurse. The agency comes from her in this telling, and she is fully aware of whom she addresses.

The Midrash makes clear that Meroe loves her father even as she hates his decrees. She is powerful herself, full of compassion against her father's inhumane treatment of the Other. Her maidservants refuse to help because of her father's order, and they say to her, "You are Pharaoh's

daughter. You cannot disobey” (20). She responds that she is Pharaoh’s daughter, “but I am also Meroe, a woman who will not watch a baby drown” (20). She sees the baby as a baby. In a world where those in power are denigrating an entire people and taking away their humanity, Pharaoh’s daughter refuses to see through that lense. She sees a baby in a basket and identifies him both as a Hebrew child and as someone worthy of life and love. Who do they say this baby is? Trash. Expendable. Who does God say this baby is? A life worth saving. Quite simply, Pharaoh’s daughter has compassion, as do the Hebrew midwives. Compassion, which is just concern for other people’s suffering, requires that you identify with the other. Her compassion links her to the midwives and to Moses’ mother and sister in her explicit decision to disobey a cruel order. Moreover, her compassion brings Moses to maturity. There are two midwives in this story, but it takes all five tricky women to successfully bring Moses into the world.

Now, compassion is risky business. Compassion hurts, and compassion may just call you to action and show all the ways you could help but don’t. It’s easier to build restrictive identities and only care about those who look like us or talk like us or pray like us. It takes less of your heart. But we, as Christians, do not really have a choice in the matter. We are called to compassion. We are called to look into the face of the other and see God. We are called to feed the hungry because it might just be Jesus. We are called to stand up for those in danger because one of them may be Moses. We are called to bring about the kingdom of God right here on earth. In *The Book of Joy*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu speaks to the issue of compassion in the face of dire situations. He was talking about apartheid and natural disaster, but it applies to our specific place and time as well: “What can you do to help change the situation? You might not be able to do a great deal, but start where you are and do what you can where you are. And yes, be appalled. It would be awful if we looked on all of that horrendousness and we said, Ah, it doesn’t really matter. It’s so wonderful that we can be distressed. That’s part of the greatness of who we are-- that you are distressed about

someone who is not family in any conventional way. And yet you feel distressed, equally. It's incredible just how compassionate and generous people can be (116)."

It's so wonderful that we can be distressed. Compassion is a gift and results from seeing the other as closely linked to the self. Division may be easy, but compassion, even when it's distressing, really is wonderful. If I look at someone, see them suffering, and feel distress, the compassionate response is the one that doesn't turn away. This is the response of the midwives, who risked everything to bring life. This is the response of pharaoh's daughter, who went against power and family because she felt pity for a baby and his family. Who do you say I am? If we as Christians believe that each person carries the image of God within, then it's not a far stretch to hear each person we encounter asking that question. Will we diminish the other to labels or race or creed? Will we choose to only care about those who look like us? Who do people say I am? Who do you say I am? And will we answer from what flesh and blood has taught us, or will we answer by faith? A strong foundation indeed.