

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I promised myself a long time ago that I would resist the temptation to rip a sermon right from the headlines of the day. I've kept that promise for many years, but I am afraid to say I'll be breaking it here this morning.

A third tier news story from England a week or ten days ago caught my attention. In the story, we learn that His Grace, the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, took a DNA test and discovered that the man who he believed was his father was, in fact, not. His newly-discovered biological father had served in Winston Churchill's cabinet during World War II and had had a drunken fling with Welby's mother, directly before her wedding to the man who, until a week ago, Welby believed was his dad.

(I imagine this came as quite a surprise to his Lordship the Archbishop. None of us particularly like our family business out in public, and how much worse when our families are well known, and the news is scandalous.)

I'm dragging you through this salacious story, and breaking my "no headlines in sermons" rule, because the Archbishop's response to the press inquiry stunned and humbled me when I read it.

When the press asked the Archbishop about his mother's infidelity and the revelation about his parentage, Welby acknowledged that the man who raised him, now deceased, was a good man and father and knowing about his biological father does nothing to change that. I thought perhaps he would go on to add "no comment" or to request privacy for the family. But instead, the Archbishop spoke beautifully about how the details of this story, saucy though they are, do not alter his understanding of his primary identity. Indeed, he goes on to tell the press that his primary identity comes directly from his understanding of himself as a Christian. A little Christ. In other words, his role as a priest, as a son, as the leader of the Anglican Communion—while important—is not the soul or the center of who he is. Of all the possible responses, this one struck me with its humility and power.

Welby's response in the press reminded me of the Baptismal rite, when I put oil on the head of the candidate and say, "you are marked as Christ's own forever." In that moment, at the font, the priest declares that the baptismal candidate is somehow different than they were a minute before. We say that, of course the child belongs to loving parents and, of course the child belongs to this community of faith—but more importantly, this newly baptized person belongs to God. And we preach that there is nothing on heaven or earth that can separate you from that love, that identity. And in a beautiful, public witness, Justin Welby used his own life as a sermon for the rest of us.

In this morning's Gospel reading, Jesus preaches in Jerusalem at one of the great Jewish festivals. He has planted himself in the courtyard of the Temple, holding forth on life, and God and the usual things street preachers preach about. And, just like last week, Jesus spends some

time talking about sheep. (You have to give the man credit for keeping on message.) Last week, we talked about how sheep have something to do with power. That the power of God looks more like a Lamb than a king. Today, Jesus is talking about sheep as a way of describing who we are. Not to put too fine a point on it, but Jesus says that we, those who follow him, are like sheep. (I don't believe that Jesus is trying to say that we are fluffy, or vegetarian, or fond of bleating. I think that Jesus uses the story of the sheep to remind us of our primary identity.) The sheep know the sound of the master's voice. The sheep know WHOSE they are.

Jesus tells the people gathered at the Temple that there is no one who can snatch away the sheep from the fold. No one. (My friend Brooke, by the way, drew my attention to that line. She was struck by the idea that no one and nothing can snatch us away from God. I told her I was going to use that line, 'cause she owes me from other sermons over the years.) No one can snatch away the sheep from the fold. Think about that for a minute. There is no force or idea or doctrine or mistake that could remove you from belonging to Christ. There is no bit of news about your parentage that pops up in the news that can change WHOSE you are.

This does not mean that the world won't try. And it doesn't mean that we don't have awfully short memories when it comes time to remember our identity as children to God. In fact, the most cursory look through the news of the day confirm that we sometimes treat our brothers and sisters like they are things or objects rather than people who belong inescapably to Christ. (By the way, my entire understanding of sin has to do with the human inclination to treat people as things rather than Children of God) Imagine what kind of life we would be compelled to live if we believed, in our bones, that the people we pass in the street belong to God. Imagine how that would impact politics, commerce, art, healthcare, agriculture.

Jesus says that no one can be snatched away, and I'm going to do my best to believe that. On one had, my identity is Ian, husband, priest, Rector, Wisconsinite, son of Philip and Susan. But below that is the identity both truer and harder to remember; One who belongs to God.

Jesus preaches the sermon this morning that we are all called to preach when we leave the church today. When you're at the grocery store or stuck in traffic or in another dreary meeting—remember that the people around you on every side belong to God. And that their primary identity is not waiter, or accountant, or sister, or rude driver. Their identity is One who belongs to God. And that piece of data is all that we need to know to move in this world with dignity and grace. That piece of data is what makes us Christians—little Christs. And that piece of data is the spark that will light up the reign of God.

So, remember whose you are. Remember that your identity as one who belongs to God cannot be snatched away from you by any force on this earth. And let that truth shine out there in the world, so that the people you encounter can know that they belong to God, too. **Amen.**