

Seventh Sunday of Easter—Year C 2016
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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
May 8, 2016

For the past sixteen years, my sister-in-law has sent me a card for every holiday—Valentine's, Christmas, Halloween, St. Patrick's. Like the rising and setting of the sun, I am certain that a cute little card will arrive a few days before any national or religious festival. When my nieces were little, they'd help out and color or write their names in the cards to give them that personal touch. And without fail, whichever holiday it was, inside the card would be pictures of my nieces and, in recent years, my nephew for the refrigerator. If you visit our house, and look at our refrigerator, you'll see soccer pictures, school pictures, Santa's lap pictures, recital pictures and pictures of each of the kids holding a live rabbit around Easter time.

My nieces are teenagers now and have gotten away from the cutesy rabbit pictures, but my nephew, Zelin, is just two and a half years old, and he has many years of embarrassing pictures ahead. I had a funny thought when I saw his Easter picture this year. There was something about the set of my nephew's eyes and his grin that put me strongly in mind of my brother. Add I thought, wow, they look a lot alike. Of course, we say this kind of thing all the time—you look like your mother, or wow, you're a chip off the old block. The reason seeing the resemblance between my brother and his son is funny in my particular case is that my nephew is actually adopted. And for many ethnic and genetic reasons, Zelin really can't look anything like my brother. And yet, in this picture, I swear that he looks a lot like his dad.

This is the last Sunday in the season of Easter. For six weeks, we have been telling the great stories of Jesus after his Resurrection—appearing to the disciples to impress and amaze. And we have heard the powerful stories in the book of Acts telling about the earliest followers of Jesus going out into the world to tell everyone near and far that Jesus is the Son of God. Next week, the church calendar will begin a new thing, a new feast, wherein we will talk about the birthday of the church and the Holy Spirit that empowers our mission. But for today, the Gospel text wrestles with the primary identity of the disciples. Its main question is this: What is the identity of one who follows Christ? Jesus prays to God and says, “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe...[t]he glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me...”

If I was editing the Gospel text today, I'd have my red pencil out, draw a line through this passage and jot down, “overwritten; simplify.” We get it. We are in Jesus. Jesus is in us. We're all in God. There's no need to take up a whole paragraph. Maybe it's just because I've heard this stuff my whole life that it seems overwrought. What if we were hearing it for the first time? What if someone stopped us on the street, and we didn't know anything about Jesus or God, and that person said, “excuse me; did you know that you are wrapped up inalienably in God? That you are in God and God is in you?” I'm not sure exactly how I'd respond, but I doubt I'd be blase.

Realistically, I know I have almost nothing in common with an itinerant rabbi from Nazareth preaching in the first century. But the Gospel writer today seems to say that, because I follow Jesus, we are somehow linked. Somehow family. Some of Jesus' identity is in me, and some of mine is in him. I will leave the details of all this for the mystics to sort out, but suffice it to say that to follow Jesus is to be changed. Is to have your identity altered. You might say that heaven and earth come close to one another in you as you go and do God's work in this world.

The earliest Christians often called themselves the followers of the Way. They didn't get around to calling themselves Christians until later. We are sons, daughters, fathers, mothers—but we are also Christians—bonded to Christ by that word by how we chose to name ourselves in the world. Christian is our name, our identity, our mantle. We are little Christs.

It's very nice, when we're sitting at home, being Christians, drinking tea, to think that we share an image with Christ. It's a nice thought, and it's pretty good for the self-esteem.

But our shared identity with Jesus confers on us a certain restlessness. It's no secret that Jesus spent his ministry before and after his death moving around—teaching, preaching, healing. Our Christ was on the move, seeking out the poor, those on the margin, those in need. Jesus comes to town after town to remind people that they are well, whole, loved and holy. And we cannot but help but do the same.

When you feel your legs getting a little antsy to get out into the world to help bring about the kingdom of God, that is Christ in you. When you must stop and give aid, to heal and comfort, that is Christ in you. And when you are steaming mad about the way the world works so very hard to keep the most vulnerable among us enslaved, that anger is also Christ within you.

So, in a way, my nephew can't look anything like my brother. The very idea is preposterous. But in another way it makes complete sense. My nephew's humor, strength, habits, language—of course these will all come from my brother. How could it be otherwise?

And we, of course, cannot help but be changed by God within us. They will know us by our love. They will know Christ because of the restlessness with which we travel the world, healing, preaching, teaching. Not us, but Christ in us.

And so, as we close this season of Resurrection and preposterous ideas, we are adopted by Christ and joined into His family forever. As we go into the world, working for the kingdom of God, we will be known, not just as Christians, but as saints. The holy ones. The ones who, just a little bit, resemble God. Amen.