

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A  
August 27, 2023  
The Rev. Mary S. Trainor  
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Texts referenced: Is 51:1-6; Ps 138; Rom 12:1-8; Matt 16:13-20; Rev. Mary S. Trainor

“Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you keep me safe...your right hand shall save me...O Lord, your love endures forever.” Ps 138

What comforting words these are from today's psalm, that as we walk through life's troubles God is with us through it all! This psalm talks about God's identity as the one who saves us, and our identity as God's beloved. In a nutshell, that's what you need to know about God and what you need to know about yourself.

Identity is big in today's Gospel. Jesus is with His disciples up in the Northern part of Israel, and He's talking with them about His identity asking, “Who do people say that I am?” Jesus wants to hear them tell Him about the talk on the streets. The disciples answer saying that they have heard folks say He is “John the Baptist,” “Elijah,” “Jeremiah.” These are not bad answers, for each of these was a respected prophet. And, yes, Jesus was a prophet – but oh my, He is so much more. Next, Jesus asks them, “But who do YOU say that I am?” This is a personal, intimate question. How do the disciples see Jesus after they have spent so much time with Him? Jesus seeks that their hearts and minds become awakened to who He really is! Only Peter had the courage to answer. Peter blurts out, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” What a moment this must have been to witness – everyone must have gone instantly silent. Peter's heart clearly had become awakened to Jesus' true identity: as the Christ, the anointed one, the long-awaited Messiah who was sent to save us. This truth had previously been hidden, and now is revealed! Jesus clearly was delighted with Peter's response, as He said, “Blessed are you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...I will give you the keys of the kingdom.” Because Peter has grasped Jesus' true identity, he has received a new identity, as the rock, the foundation for the church. Some of the other disciples there at the time might not have opened themselves up yet to the reality of Jesus' divinity. Maybe they haven't been fully present during Jesus' teachings. Maybe they were holding part of themselves back.

I don't know about you, but I'm not always fully present. I sure leave part of myself behind in some situations; For example, back when I was a scientist at Los Alamos National Lab, I remember a particularly long boring required meeting. My physical body was in that chair, but the real me wasn't there. My mind was elsewhere and my body sure would have preferred to be elsewhere too. I was not committed to what we were doing that day. Can you relate? Have you left part of yourself behind in certain situations, and not been fully present? Are you fully present to God? The Great Commandment Jesus gave us (Matt 22:36) is, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” To love God with our whole selves means embodied worship and faithfulness as every day, leaving no part of ourselves behind. In our Epistle today, St. Paul amplifies on this saying, “by the mercies of God, present your bodies

as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God...be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern...what is good." As we fully present ourselves to God, our identity becomes linked to the identity of Jesus and we are transformed. That is what we are doing here at St. Mark's. We too are journeying down the road of life with Jesus who asks us "who do YOU say that I am?"

Corn mazes are coming! Yes, we are coming up on autumn, and here in Wisconsin big mazes are cut out of corn fields for fun times of adventure. If you have never done one, let me tell you – they can be scary because you can hit dead ends, get lost, and be unsure where you are going! In our lives, we have times that we feel we are in a maze too, when we are scared, when we don't know who we are anymore, when we feel lost or hit a dead end. Even in those times, we always know Jesus is present loving us. Jesus is the Messiah, the great "I am," the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate for the sheep, the Good Shepherd, the resurrection and the life, the way and the truth, and the vine. There are so many superlative images of Jesus, because no one image can do justice to His identity.

When we claim the identity of Jesus in our hearts, we start to grasp the fullness and majesty of Jesus, the lavish outpouring of love for us, and then we can begin to see better who we are. Your true identity, who you were made to be, is found in the identity of Jesus! Often when we think of our identity, we think of our profession or home or culture or lifestyle – and we often show aspects of our identity in our clothing or tattoos or hairstyles. Brother James Koester, of the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Boston, says this: "What we wear on our hearts should be just as obvious to the world as what we wear on our bodies. Our T-shirts may say "Harvard," but our hearts should say Jesus. Our jeans may say "Levis," but our hearts should say Jesus." Paul says it this way in Ephesians 2:10: "For we are God's masterpiece. God has created us anew in Christ Jesus so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago." That is who YOU are: God's masterpiece! That is your identity!

So, who do YOU think Jesus is? Maybe you are like many, who rely on what they were taught about Jesus as children, from someone else's beliefs. Maybe you haven't thought about it much. Whatever the case, NOW is the time to get in touch with what you believe about Jesus. You can get to know Jesus from the Bible, from prayer, from the Book of Common Prayer, and through this church. Here we are together, one body, a community in which YOU are valued for who you are. Christ may be the only thing we have in common, but Christ is all that matters. As our Epistle says today, "we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another."

Today and this week, spend time with Jesus. Grasp Jesus' immense love for you; you are God's masterpiece. Soak yourself into Jesus' identity and as you walk through life's troubles, chant the words of today's Psalm, "Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you keep me safe...your right hand shall save me...O Lord, your love endures forever." AMEN.