

Something that is very important to every one of us is our identity, our sense of who we are. Often, we define ourselves by our relationships, such as “I’m Paul’s son, or I’m Sally’s husband. Sometimes, our descriptions of ourselves are given in terms of vocation or how we make our living. Sometimes people describe themselves in terms of where they live, or where they go to school, or any of a number of ways that point to external things. You see, external things - relationships, environment, possessions - greatly influence how we think about and understand ourselves.

Sometimes, we are challenged about this. Sometimes, someone will call us short and say, “Tell me who you really are.” Sometimes, when we struggle with life’s deeper meanings, or try to make sense of our lives, we, too, become philosophical and ask the question, “Who am I, really?” In those moments, when we look inwardly more deeply, we find ourselves reaching for the core of self, asking the existential question, “What meaning do I have?” “What is my purpose for being?” How we answer this, if we dare to dwell to seek an answer, can strongly influence how we feel about ourselves, how we value ourselves. In other words, our answer to the identity question contributes significantly to our sense of self worth. At the deepest level, identity is about the core self. This is the self that is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow. Identity, at this level, answers the question, “Who am I?” If we like the answer, then we feel good about ourselves. In a word, we have positive self-esteem. One of the greatest psychologists of our time, the late Erik Erikson, who contributed much to the body of psychological knowledge, said that the identity question, “Who am I?” begs a deeper question of “Whose am I.” The implication is that our sense of identity is indelibly and irrevocably bound to our sense of belonging. If we value that to which we belong, we believe that we, too, have value. How we answer the question, “To whom or to what do I belong?” has a direct and sometimes profound influence on our own sense of self worth.

In today’s Gospel lesson, taken from the 10th chapter of John, Jesus tells us “whose we are.” We are his. Jesus tells us, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand, because my Father has given them to me. What my Father has given me is greater than all else,” Jesus said. In this section of John, Jesus tells us that he understands himself as the “Good Shepherd” and that we are the sheep of his pasture. Jesus says that we are those, whom God has given him charge, and that he will be our shepherd and that he will lose none of us. He tells us that he is the Good Shepherd, and that the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. Whose are we? We are sheep of the Lord’s own fold; we are lambs of the Good Shepherd’s pasture.

Why are we Christ's own? Because we are baptized into the Body of Christ, the Holy Catholic Church. We are baptized into our Lord's death and resurrection. We are baptized into the Easter faith of Resurrection and New Life. Life is process, and we live our Christian lives in Christian community, taking on more and more the character - *the identity* - of our Master, of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, as we strive to truly be disciples in the imitation of Christ. Our characters evolve towards the image of God. When we do fall away from that image, from *Christ-likeness*, we feel badly. We grieve the blemishing of our personal image of self because we have not lived up to our Christian ideal.

In the Episcopal Church and throughout the Anglican world, immediately after a person is baptized, the bishop or priest anoints him on the forehead with holy oil and says, "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever." "Whose are we?" We are Christ's own sheep, forever. We are the focus of the Savior's love, a love that flowed red on Calvary, a love that washes even the darkest spots from us, and leaves us as clean as the new-fallen snow.

The one thing in Christian formation that gives Christian identity and holds the Christian self cohesively together is the Savior's love. The voice that calls and the voice we follow is the voice of love. This most perfect love, embodied in Christ, is a compelling, but never compulsive love. It is always an unconditional love, an enabling love that lets be and asks only that we be all that we can, in Christ. When we experience this love, we feel a great desire to love others as he loves us. This is conformation in Christ. In its root meaning, when we are conformed in Christ by his love, we are brought into shared identity with him. We are made Christ-like by his love.

Love is a two-way street. It is a mutual thing that flows both ways. Our capacity to love and care for others, in Christian community, is the result of having been loved and cared for by God in Christ. If we are to practice Christianity in its ultimate sense, by following our Lord's commandment to love others as he loves us, and to love God with all our hearts, souls and minds, we must understand that even the capacity to want to do this, unconditionally and irrevocably, is the gift of God's love. We can love because he first loved us. Psychologists tell us that when it comes to love, surely you cannot give what you do not have. They are absolutely right.

To love others as Christ loves us is to love unconditionally and without any expectation except the hope of love, in return. Christian love is an enabling love that seeks only the good for the other. It is a love that accepts the other just as she or he is. Christian love loves what is rather than what might be or ought to be. Christian love is inclusive, not exclusive of any part of humanity. When we love this way, we find that we give of self, sometimes just a little; sometimes quite a bit. We pay a price in the giving away of self for the good of the other. In other words, Christian love is sacrificial - just as Christ's love was sacrificial. There is no better model for us than the model of the Cross. *Amen.*