

September 16, 2018 17th Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

Isaiah 50:4-9a, Mark 8:27-38

(Debie Thomas, in Journey with Jesus, posted on 9 September 2018.)

In the name of the Creator, the Christ and the Sustainer. Amen.

Who do you say that I am?

Over Labor Day Weekend, we helped my parents host a 50th anniversary party at their home.

Our family is small and scattered far and wide, so the party included just a few family members,
and lots and lots of friends.

There were friends from church and from the neighborhood.

There were the Cigar Guys and the Book Group.

There were colleagues they worked with over the years, and friends from the town where we lived when I
was growing up.

As we prepared, they showed me the guest list and we began to talk about a few special guests:

that tiny handful of family who came from southern Illinois and Kentucky,

and the woman who had long ago introduced them at a Lutheran campus ministry volleyball game.

These folks, my mom explained, should have a name tag with not only their name but also their role...

Marcia's brother, Jim's cousin, the Introducer.

With my best penmanship, I lettered the nametags, but it got me thinking about two things:

First, as much as "Kurt" was indeed my mother's brother (which I dutifully wrote on the name tag),
I know him as my uncle.

It's all relational and it matters when we're trying to figure out identity...and nametags.

Secondly, what about **everyone** using name tags?

What about knowing their names, and then also how they relate?

"church friends", "Saturday morning knitting" or whatever people added, or didn't.

It turns out this idea was already on my parent's minds—they just needed a nudge.

These nametags, with their relational cues, helped lots of us start conversations farther down the road.

We didn't have to grasp for names and connections, instead we could catch up, share stories.

In today's gospel, Jesus and the disciples are in the area of Caesarea Philippi.

Their ministry is ramping up, they've been to the mountain, experienced the feedings and the healings.

They think they "get it", they think they understand what following Jesus means.

Maybe Jesus is testing them, or maybe Jesus really is curious what others are saying.

But there he is, on a dry, dusty road, pointedly asking: "Who do people say that I am?"

Well, that's an easy starter, they can all get in on the action, folks are talking:

some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, some say one of the prophets.

And then Jesus goes deeper, “But who do you say that I am?”

In a sense, he’s asking, “What do I mean to you?”

Set aside the talk on the street, and think about the life we’ve shared, the meals, the miles, the tears, the laughter: Who do you say that I am?

You can almost hear the shuffling of stones along that dusty road, this gets personal.

There is a vulnerability for Jesus to dare ask, and for Peter, or anyone of them, to risk responding.

Finally, Peter replies: You are the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One.

We hear Peter’s response and nod, yep, he’s got it, he’s right: the Anointed One.

But, like I said, this gets personal, and honestly, this is where it gets weird.

In a second Jesus is telling them not to tell others, and he describes what is to come: suffering, death.

Jesus’ response is so intense that Peter pulls Jesus aside in rebuke, and then Jesus rebukes Peter.

Anyone eager to avoid conflict is out the door about now,

but there’s an intimacy in this tough exchange, a push and a pull, that survives, that endures.

From the stories we know, so many years later,

Peter could have responded like blogger Debie Thomas muses:

“‘Who do you say that I am?’ You’re the one who said ‘Yes, come walk on the water with me.’

‘You’re the one who caught me before I drowned.’

‘You’re the one who washed my feet while I squirmed in shame.’

‘You’re the one who told me—accurately—that I’d be a coward on the very night you needed me to be brave. You’re the one I denied to save my own skin.’

...[And] ‘You’re the one who found me on the beach and spoke love and fresh purpose into my humiliation.’”

Understanding only partially, Peter declares: “You are the Messiah, the Anointed One.”

Who do you say that I am? That’s the question for the day.

That sounds like a question about Jesus, and it is, of course.

But it turns out that Jesus’ identity tells us something about ourselves, about our own identity.

If Jesus is the Anointed One, and we’re part of his body, part of his baptism, part of his death, then by baptism we too are anointed, set aside, made holy.

This story reveals something sacred in Jesus, and in us, as well.

We’re Anointed to do the hard work of letting go, reckoning with mortality,

unclenching our tight grip so that God can use us in all our pain, all our brokenness, all our love.

Who do you say that I am?

By baptism into Jesus' death and resurrection, I am a Beloved Child of God.

And you, dear friends, you are a Beloved Child of God.

Every day, all night, saint or sinner, at our best, or in the muck: we are God's beloved.

I went to a funeral yesterday—some of you here there, too.

It was a funeral for a colleague and friend, one of the pastors at Edina Community Lutheran Church,
Stephanie Coltvét Erdmann.

Stephanie was just 40 year old, with young kids and a spouse and in the middle of so much life,
but a cascade of medical events led too quickly to her death.

Such aching grief, such sorrow, for so many who love her.

Stephanie was a lot of things to a lot of people.

Her name tag could say as much: mom, spouse, friend, daughter, sister, pastor ...

I was moved though, through the fight for her life and then at her death,

in Caring Bridge posts and funeral bulletins,

the first and sometimes only identity listed was Beloved Child of God.

This relationship to Jesus is essential.

When our congregational leaders gathered this week,

we approved new vision goals to guide us through the next few years.

These pick up on goals we crafted three years ago, goals we have lived into well.

These **new** goals take us farther, they go deeper,

deeper in making our walls porous in the neighborhood,

deeper in embracing people at every stage in life's journey,

deeper in our worship life and in our practice of spirituality.

And they ask us to do hard things,

to listen with care as we address our own privilege and systemic oppression.

They ask us to let go of power-over others, so that we can be relationally powerful.

They ask us to make a safe space for doubt, for questions, for curiosity and for grace.

They ask us to let the Holy Spirit inspire our worship, realizing we may be changed.

All these hard things, not just for the heck of it, but because it's here, at the cross, that we find Jesus, again,
it's here that together we experience new life.

In just a few minutes we'll use these goals, these aspirations in our service.

You'll be invited to speak the goals aloud.

If you are visiting today you may say, this isn't my community, I can't claim these goals. That's fine.
I offer you (and everyone) space to participate as much or as little as feels right.

Who are we?

Who are we as a beloved community?

May these goals be part of this identity,
part of understanding ourselves in relationship to our Christ.

And may we go about our days—our heartbreaks and our joy—held strongly in the tender arms of
the one who first names us Beloved.

Amen.