



REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE

March 10, 2019, First Sunday in Lent

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

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In a book on Baptism, Will Willimon, former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University and now a retired Methodist Bishop, recalled that back in high school, every Friday and Saturday night, as he was leaving home to go on a date, his mother would bid him farewell at the front door with these weighty words, “Don’t forget who you are.”

“You know what she meant,” Willimon writes. “She did not mean that I was in danger of forgetting my name and my street address. She meant that, alone on a date, in the midst of some party, in the presence of some strangers, I might forget who I was. I might lose sight of the values with which I had been raised, answer to some alien name, engage in some unaccustomed behavior.

“‘Don’t forget who you are,’ was her maternal benediction as I left home.”ⁱ

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. We begin this somber season with the temptation of Jesus by the devil in the wilderness. But the stories that come right before that testing, in Luke’s deft editorial hand, function as something akin to the maternal benediction Willimon got whenever he left home: “Don’t forget who you are.”

You see, just before this difficult, decisive encounter with the devil is the story of Jesus’ baptism. Followed by Luke’s version of Jesus’ genealogy. Their placement there is no accident.

At his baptism, the voice from heaven names Jesus, gives him his identity: “You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well-pleased.” “Don’t forget who you are.”



Next comes Jesus' family tree, placing him within a particular history and people: Luke even starts with a little humor. Jesus was the son, then Luke puts in parentheses, (as was thought), of Joseph, son of Heli, son of... and the list goes on for generations reaching back far enough that the names begin to sound familiar again: son of David, son of Jesse...son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham, then farther back still to: son of Noah, son of Methuselah...ending with the ultimate genealogical coup: son of Adam, son of God. "Don't forget who you are."

Then comes the wilderness...forty days with Jesus worn down and famished. And here is what the devil says in the most tempting of voices, "*If you are the Son of God*, turn stone into bread." Next, with a wave of his hand, the devil motions toward the empires of the earth and promises Jesus all the glory and authority he could ever want if he will just worship the shadow kingdom to the kingdom of God. And one more time, that little phrase that has the punch of "prove it!": "*If you are the Son of God*...jump off the top of the temple, God will catch you; that is...if you really are his Son?" "Don't forget who you are," echoes the maternal benediction of God.

As Will Willimon says, "it is sometimes difficult in modern life, amidst the conflicting claims and confusion of names, to remember who we are. We are forever answering to some false name, forever misunderstanding who we are and by whom we are named. It is easy to forget."ⁱⁱ

Even Jesus faced the temptation to forget who he was and by whom he was named and for what purposes he was claimed. It is not, after all, always a simple matter of choosing the obvious good over a transparent evil. Why, that would not be hard at all. No, the difficulty comes because sometimes one choice can look as promising or as harmless as another one. We can and do answer to other names. We can and do become convinced that an alternative claim is a better bet; that other choices glitter with brighter merit. It can happen so subtly and seductively that we barely notice the eroding effects these choices and turns can cause in us or among us.



I had an opportunity to hear one of the co-authors of the book, **How Democracies Die**, speak at the Harvard Club on Friday. Both authors are professors of political science, each specializing in democracies in other parts of the world. Their expertise in comparative political science peaked their interest in assessing the state of our democracy at this point in the development of the United States. They have studied how democracies do not always weaken by some overt huge means anymore. Instead, the changes happen more slowly and subtly now. Little decisions here and there—a weakening of this area of government or that one, seemingly unrelated...but in fact there are ties that bind democracies and when one is loosed here and another there...well, things shift. Almost imperceptibly for a while. One observation of their concern for the United States focused on the deep and growing polarization in our country by political affiliation. In the past, our two-party system had less-pronounced ideological differences and divides. Political parties were more inclined to ‘mutual toleration’ and ‘political forbearance and restraint’ necessary to the trust upon which democracy depends. But over the past 10-20 years, the differences between the two parties have become more pronounced, while also hardening into suspicion, even animosity, which we embody in speech and action, with damaging effects on our democracy as a whole. Such highly polarized camps, combined with other factors, destabilize our democracy. Without minimizing the complexity of “who we are” as Americans, if we lose any semblance of mutual toleration and trust and forbearance, a shared commitment to a common good, we are in danger of losing much more.

Deuteronomy 26 is a text written to remind Israel of their shared memories and common history: How their ancestor was a ‘wandering Aramean’ until God brought Jacob into a land and gave him a new name. How God heard their cries in slavery, led them through water and wilderness, gave them commandments, land their life together. Because of what God has done and all that God has given them and how God has formed them for life together, their thanksgiving and first fruits and glad obedience is due to God alone. Their truest identity and calling are found within that shared story. “Don’t forget who you are,” Deuteronomy counsels.



As Christians, we refuse to live out of anything other than our baptism.”ⁱⁱⁱ If any other affiliation we claim in this life takes precedence over our baptismal identity, we know something is wrong. When we come together to worship, we are one, all of us members of the Body of Christ, and no other loyalty takes precedence. Yet even we can be tempted by other claims. One church historian notes that there is a lot of talk right now about the church’s mission or purpose; a lot of confusion and agonizing is being expressed over the church’s proper role in society. What our biblical texts today make clear is that the first and most important question is not the question of purpose, but the question of identity. Not first, “What are we to do?” but rather “Who are we?” Remembering who we are, he says, is the key to mission and it is the key to standing against the forces of the world that seek to lead us away from trust in the one true God.^{iv}

This, I think, is the invitation on this first Sunday in Lent: to spend intentional time reflecting on your true and deepest sense of identity. What identity most claims you? To what or to whom do I give my deepest thanksgiving, the best and first of my resources, my glad obedience? What most tempts me to become distracted, confused, or to forget who I am most deeply claimed and called to be?

In my first church, I baptized a baby girl. Her four-year-old brother stood with his parents up front. As the liturgy for baptism ended, I asked Joe if he would like to come with me as I carried his little sister during the hymn of welcome. “Would you like to help me introduce her to the congregation?” I asked. As the organ music began, his eyes grew wide and he nodded yes. The three of us headed for the central aisle: baby in my right arm and Joe holding my left hand.

In that sanctuary, if you timed it right, you could get all the way to the back and return to the front in three verses, with one verse to spare. We reached the first pew on the left when Joe suddenly stopped, leaned over to the people seated there and said, “This is Catherine Dana Prewitt.” It was sweet really. We got to the second pew on the left. He stopped again, “This is Catherine Dana Prewitt.” Ok, adorable. It was the same at the third pew, the fourth, the fifth, all the way to the 14th pew, back left. And that was just the half of it, literally, because there was the right half



of the sanctuary still to go. All of us learned something that day. Her full name, for one thing. That 4 year-olds are concrete thinkers, for another thing. But we also certainly learned that we are beloved of God, who calls us by name, remembers us forever, and claims us over and over and above all other things and powers in this world.

Fred Craddock once recalled a conversation he had with a young woman, twenty-eight years old, at St. Mark's Methodist Church in Atlanta after worship. She said, "This is the first time I was ever in a church." "Really?" Craddock asked. "Yeah." "Well," he said, "how was it?" She said, "Kind of scary." "Kind of scary?" She said, "Yeah." So Fred asked, "Why?" And she said, "It just seems so important. You know, I never go to anything important. This just seemed so important."^v

Fresh from his baptism, Jesus, himself the beloved Son of God, faced the temptation to be and to do something else with his life. So, to be here on this first Sunday in Lent, to be here together, to consider baptism and our identity...well, it just seems so important.

Don't forget who you are.

Amen.

ⁱ William H. Willimon, **Remember Who You Are: Baptism, a model for Christian Life** (Nashville, Tennessee: The Upper Room, 1980) 105.

ⁱⁱ Willimon, 105.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard L. Christiansen, "Between Text and Sermon: Deuteronomy 26:1-11 in *Interpretation*, p.60.

^{iv} Christiansen, 60-61.

^v Fred B. Craddock, **Craddock Stories**, edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001), 132.