A Sense of Identity - Brian Hartley
Second Sunday after Pentecost A

Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

This is the summer of remembrance. It marks one of those interstices in time when the anniversary of events that stretch across generations just happen to intersect. A hundred years ago, it was the final summer in an era of peace that had existed throughout much of Europe since the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte a century earlier. By September, all hell would be breaking loose and within a few years the flower of Western Europe, an entire generation of young men, would largely be lost. In its wake, the survivors would attempt to make sense of a new world drastically different from that of their youth.

Seventy years ago, Allied troops were beginning their march towards Paris and Berlin, having come ashore in the greatest naval invasion of all time at Normandy. Some of those men are still alive and returned recently to say a final good-bye to their comrades buried beneath foreign soil.

And, fifty years ago, it was a long hot summer in which Civil Rights legislation, first proposed by President Kennedy and then pushed through congress by President Johnson, was at long last being enacted. Many of you have probably seen that famous photo of Johnson's signing with Dr. King standing directly behind his left shoulder. But, that moment had not come about except through much sweat, bloodshed, and even death.

All of these events have deeply shaped the world in which we now live. Many of us here this morning labor intensely in our classrooms to help these stories come alive for our students. But these narratives, which seem so distant to our charges, shaped an entire generation and gave them an identity. One of them was Representative John J. Lewis, the son of southern sharecroppers, who was beaten to a bloody pulp as one of the Freedom Riders. He would go on to study philosophy and religion as an undergraduate and become one of the icons of the Civil Rights movement. But, like the boys who went off to fight in World War I and II, he would have to go through a time of trial and difficulty. Only in such a way could he go from being a boy, without an identity, to a man with one. And, all of today's texts posit just such a liminal reality—that pain is at the center of the human predicament, that all of us must find a way of entering into and being embraced by the world's suffering, and that through such an experience we will come to a new and fresh sense of who we are. For our true identity is ultimately rooted in the Redeemer God made known in Jesus Christ.

Ishmael's story provides us with a kind of central narrative whose themes will echo throughout the Bible. A young lad who had weathered the first three years or so of life begins by having a feast thrown for him and ends up an outcast about to die under a bush in the wilderness. If ever there was a rite of passage story, this is it. The firstborn of the patriarch, Abraham, has become a castoff—his mother, Hagar, dismissed from service and expelled into the desert. Here we find images to which the biblical writers will return again and again. In fact, Jesus, himself, will live into these very symbols. For, we are told, at the beginning of his own ministry the Spirit threw him out into the wilderness to be tested and tried, to wrestle with hunger pangs and the rays of the sun.

What distinguishes this story is the heartfelt cry of a mother. There is nothing quite as bone-chilling as the spontaneous emission of hopelessness and grief that comes from a mother who has lost a child. Unfortunately, it is a cry I have heard many times—first, in my hospital work, and later, as a pastor. Merton P. Strommen, in his book, *Five Cries of Grief*, begins with a first-person account from a mother who has just seen her dead son. She describes the pain as feeling like a knife that cut right through her, accompanied by waves of nausea. The sharp edges of pain oftentimes result in a kind of primal scream that pierces one's ears and makes the hair on the back of your neck stand straight up.

One of the most passionately debated issues in religious art has concerned the response by Mary to the crucifixion and death of Jesus. Most medieval images from before the 13th century portray her as standing, sometimes quite stoically, at the foot of the cross. In the late medieval era, however, a new image began to emerge of a swooning Virgin, collapsing in a heap at her son's feet, sustained only by the strength of the Beloved Disciple. Her eyes are closed; her arms are limp; her legs faltering. I have oftentimes wondered if this emergence of realism, of a more human Mary, has something to do with the experience of the Black Death. The plague was responsible for the loss of around half of the population across Europe over the course of four years or so. The grief suffered by countless mothers must have been horrific. In her book, *The Great Silence*, Juliet Nicolson documents the continuing sense of loss felt by mothers, wives, and sisters whose loved one never returned from the battlefields of Passchendaele and the Somme. The intensity of suffering and woundedness would remain with them for a lifetime.

That sense of lament is captured for us this morning in today's reading from the Psalter. Psalms of lament make up some 40% of the entire corpus of this book—something that may come as a surprise to those who associate the word "psalm" automatically with praise. In these texts we discover "despair, anger, protest, and doubt." The scholar, John Goldingay, reminds us: "The psalms of pain and protest shock Christians who are not used to this way of talking to God. Yet they have an explicit place in the New Testament. Jesus uses the phraseology of Psalm 6 and/or 42 in Gethsemane, and on the cross utters the extraordinary cry that opens Psalm 22 (Mark 14:34; 15:34). Nor does Jesus pray these prayers so that we might not have to do so, for a lament such as Psalm 44 appears on the lips of Paul (Rom. 8:36). In the Bible, believers grieve and protest. To refuse to do so is often to refuse to face our pains and our (own) losses."

In her book, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, Marva Dawn decries the lack of room for lament in our churches. The victim of debilitating disease, she knows whereof she speaks. The so-called "chumminess" of contemporary worship thrust upon many congregations because of our desire not to offend participants actually winds up distorting the gospel. It creates what I have, at times, called "happy-fun-ball" theology. We see it in much of contemporary American evangelical worship today in its attempt to cater to a consumer-oriented approach to congregants—disguised as seeker-friendly evangelism. At its worst, it produces a kind of "health and wealth" gospel which plagues many of our overseas churches made up of the poorest of the poor who genuinely desire something better. At its heart, though, it ignores the invitation to embrace our identity in the cross of Jesus and attempts to, in the words of one worship scholar, "pole-vault over Calvary on the way to Pentecost," (Paul Zahl, *Exploring the Worship Spectrum*, 154).

Such a twisted theology was entirely foreign to the apostle Paul who, in today's reading from the epistle to the Romans, insists on understanding our baptism through the lens of Christ's death and resurrection. His ethical admonitions are actually predicated on his challenge that the church is not primarily a collection of persons with common interests but, instead, is the body of Christ. Through his death, the corpse of Jesus has become the body of Christ into which we have been incorporated through the act of baptism. Wayne Meeks unpacks Paul's baptismal understanding brilliantly in his book, *The First Urban Christians*. He maintains that "Paul's argument depends on common recognition that baptism draws a line between the unwashed world and the washed Christians, and that 'clean" is a metaphor for 'behaving properly,'" (154). The burial in the water was not merely representative but participatory. It bound the baptized to Christ and the church and, coming up through the water, marked a transition to a new creature and into a new community characterized by "sacredness, homogeneity, unity, love, equality, humility" (157).

Paul's language here is the language of death—death to self and death to sin. Unlike some who insist on seeing the cross only as a past event, the apostle declares that it is literally the crux of history towards which God's plan moved and into which all must now return as a point of reference. In his new book, *The Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New Covenant*, my good friend, Dr. Michael Gorman, lays out this ancient view of the atonement and suggests that it is a call to "a life of communal and individual participation in Jesus' faithful, loving, peacemaking death." As such, it moves beyond the facile "Jesus died for my sins on the cross" vocabulary of much of evangelicalism and posits "a more comprehensive, integrated, participatory, communal, and missional model."

The first generation of the church knew something of this model firsthand. The evangelist, Matthew, makes this perfectly clear in today's gospel lection where Jesus is seen instructing his disciples. Matthew, unlike the other gospel writers, has this propensity to take the teachings of Jesus and to clump them into five large sections in his narrative—perhaps as a kind of "instructional Torah" for his listeners. This morning's lesson comes from the second of these sections of teaching—the one that comes after chapters 5-7 which we commonly label the Sermon on the Mount.

Here, the disciples stand in for Matthew's church, who, probably coming from Jewish origins themselves, hear that they should expect to be persecuted and maligned. Choosing to follow Jesus for them oftentimes meant having to sever all relationships in order to assume a new identity. In their world, no set of relationships superseded that of the family. The family unit, much larger than most of our families today, was one's primary place of identity. All members were expected to embrace and follow the lead role of the *paterfamilias*, the head of household. Familial love was understood to be the strongest claim on one's life. To turn one's back on one's family was considered the ultimate rejection and a cause for shame.

To then hear that a call to follow Jesus meant seeing members of that household as one's foes must have had a much deeper challenge then than even now. Again, the introduction of cross-language is not just for effect; it is meant to invite one into the suffering and death of the master and teacher. Far from being an invitation to glory, it was understood to be a call to debasement—what Paul would label "low and despised" to the congregants at Corinth. Those hearing this call, whether former Jews from Palestine (like Matthew's audience) or the most brazen Gentiles from Corinth (like Paul's audience), would have understood this gospel message as inextricably intertwined in cross and baptismal imagery.

From whence do we draw our identity? For some of us, perhaps it is from our nationality. After all, our passports clearly label us as Americans and in a few short weeks we will join together in a corporate pyrotechnic orgy of stars and stripes. For others, perhaps it is from our position of power or our paycheck. We have chosen to gauge who we are by a title or by our bank account or, perhaps it is from our sense of success or attractiveness, those pervasive cultural values. Maybe even closer to home, given our recent celebration of Father's and Mother's Day, we view ourselves primarily through the lens of our place within the family and find value through a parental role. None of these identities are bad within themselves, but, for the follower of Jesus, they can never be our primary point of reference. For, more than anything else, we are outcasts, like Ishmael, rescued by the redeemer God and baptized into the death and resurrection of his son, Jesus Christ.

Many of you know that my father is suffering from the onset of Alzheimer's disease—a malady that robs one, not only of memory, but of identity. Reading the literature does not provide a family with a lot of hope. In fact, it can be quite discouraging. But, even more difficult can be watching one's loved one fade into oblivion over the course of time—what many have labeled "the long goodbye." My father has good days and bad days. Most days he has difficulty putting together words or recalling where he has just been or what he has just done. Fortunately, he has not yet lost all recognition. His eyes still light up when I walk into the room, even if he usually calls me his brother, rather than his son. But that light is slowly fading and I know that there will soon come a time when he may well be rendered mute or overly combative. He will not recognize me, my siblings, or even my mother. The deterioration in his frontal lobe will have robbed him of most everything…including his dignity. He will have lost all sense of an identity rooted in the narrative tapestry that forges a human life.

These are the realities of our common human existence, my friends. Life is filled with pain, hurt, and disappointment. As Flannery O'Connor wrote in one of her letters, "What people don't realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross." No matter how well we live our lives or how hard we pray, death and decay remain with us. This is what those who went before us learned—sometimes in quite horrific ways on the fields of battle. We are creatures of dust and clay and we can do quite horrible things to one another. But, in our times of pain, in our times of greatest despair, God is still with us. He was in the rat-infested trenches of France. He was there on the blood-stained sands of Omaha Beach. He was even there in the midst of a mob of vindictive racists intent on doing violence to all those who struggled for civil rights. And he is with us whenever our child dies or our parent suffers.

As Paul goes on to say a few chapters later in Romans, "What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord," (Romans 8:31-32, 37-39).

In his just-published book, *Loving Samuel*, my friend and former student, Dr. Aaron Cobb, tries to describe this truth to his young son in this way: “God has not promised us that we get to live a certain number of years. Instead, God has promised to be with us. But God hates death as much as we do. He is doing everything he can to challenge and defeat death and darkness. God is life and light. Cling to this truth: God is doing everything He can to deliver us from death. This is God’s promise.”

This is, indeed, God’s promise to us. This is what sustains us. And this is who we are. Amen.