

**NAMED—CLAIMED—CALLED GOD’S OWN**

Elissa Ely is a psychiatrist who works in a clinic for homeless persons. Recently she had an encounter with a fellow there, who was struggling with a new kind of problem. It wasn’t the usual sort of concern about what he was going to eat or where he was going to sleep—though he had those issues as well. It was more complicated.

It seems that recently he had pulled a muscle in his shoulder. So he went to the local ER to get some relief. Things went as usual—the check of his vital signs by the nurse, the long wait for the doctor, and so on. Finally when the doctor did arrive, she looked over the chart. Ely describes what happened next:

“‘I see you were here last October,’ [the doctor] said . . . That surprised him. He had never been in this emergency room before. He told her so. She checked the chart [again] . . . ‘No you were here for an overdose,’ she said. According to the chart he had been transported in a stupor from a shelter across town.

“Well, he had certainly stayed at that shelter, maybe even last October. But he was not a drug user, had never overdosed, and had never been to this ER.” (New York *Times*, 1-8-08)

The ER doctor obviously didn’t believe him. In the name of patient confidentiality, she wouldn’t even let him look at the chart, even though it had his name on it. If he was right, someone had pilfered his social security number, and was using his identity. The doctor wrote him a prescription for ibuprofen and released him. But suddenly his sore shoulder was the least of his worries. What if this other person was using his name and number for other things as well?

“Before my shoulder started hurting,” he told Ely, “life was easier . . . There was only one of me then.” (Ibid)

In some ways, identity theft is a very recent phenomenon. In our electronically connected world, it has become much easier for ill-intended folks to rip off another person’s identity and use it for personal gain.

But in other ways, the need to feel secure about ones owns identity is as old as the human race. Understanding, discovering and nurturing ones own sense of self is one of the major tasks of childhood and adolescence. For that matter, it is arguably a lifetime task.

Stop for a minute and consider the basic question, who am I? Beyond my name and social security number, who am I? Beyond my ethnicity, my nationality, my gender, who am I?

Beyond my occupation, who am I? Such things do, indeed help shape our identity, but there must be more to it than that. For dementia could rob me of my own name. I could have my social security number stolen. I could move to a new country, get a new job—even alter my gender. Who am I then?

Perhaps, the answer is found in our relationships. Who am I? A son of Connie and Howard. The husband of Linda. The father of Matt and Bruce and Liz. There can be little doubt that who I am is defined in large measure by my relationships to others. But relationships can change as well. Sons and daughters can be disowned by their parents. Husbands and wives can get divorced. Children can go their whole lives never knowing who their parents really are. Who am I then?

This fundamental human question must have challenged Jesus as well.

Scholar Eugene Boring writes: “There is no psychologizing of Jesus’ baptismal experience in Matthew . . . [He] does not speculate on what went on in the soul of Jesus. . . .” (New Interpreter's Bible, VII: 160) No, Matthew’s purpose in telling the story is to make a theological point about the nature of the Christ. But one can’t help but wonder about what Jesus was thinking, what was stirring in his soul.

As he grew up in Nazareth, he no doubt heard rumors about his birth. People must have whispered about his parentage. Bruce Chilton, in his book *Rabbi Jesus*, speculates that Jesus may indeed have been considered a *mamzer*. He writes: “The term *mamzer* refers specifically to a child born of a prohibited sexual union . . . The fundamental issue was not sex before marriage . . . but sex with the wrong person. An unmarried woman impregnated by a man outside her own community was . . . suspected of illicit intercourse.” (12) Was he the son of Joseph, or not?

Perhaps he felt inner stirrings of God’s Spirit at work within him that caused him to wonder about his purpose in life. Was he supposed to be a carpenter? Was he supposed to be a husband? A father? Was he supposed to lead a life like most that of most of his peers? Or was he called to some other duty, some other task?

And, so, it appears, he goes in search of his true identity. Like many others Jesus hears that his cousin John is preaching by the Jordan River. He is calling people to repent, to turn their lives around. To live in a renewed relationship with God. And as a sign of that relationship, he invites them to be baptized in the waters of the Jordan.

Baptism was not something John had invented; indeed for centuries Jews had been practicing ritual immersions. When one converted to Judaism, part of the ceremonial induction

included a baptism. It symbolized a washing away of impurity, and was required before one could enter the Temple. It was a sign and symbol of a person's new identity as a Jew.

Ritual immersions were also used when a Jew had strayed from the law. It was a way of symbolically washing away sin, and, if you will, reclaiming one's relationship to God and with the community. It was a way of reclaiming one's identity.

Jesus, of course, was already a Jew. He didn't need the baptism offered to converts. And, historically, he is understood to have been free of sin, so he doesn't appear to have needed ritual purification. So why baptism? Indeed, when he approaches John, who recognizes him as the Messiah, John asks that very question: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (3:14) But Jesus insists, and so John takes him out into the midst of the Jordan, and dips him into the waters.

But then, as Jesus rises up out of the flowing stream, water coursing down his head and body, Matthew tells us he has a vision. He sees the heavens opened up; he senses the descent of God's Spirit, as if it were a dove. And then he hears a voice. "This is my Beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Who am I? God's Beloved Son. In his baptism Jesus has his identity clarified and affirmed. He is God's Beloved Son. It is basic to who he is. It is at the very core of his being.

Sometimes people ask me why we baptize infants. Do we believe in original sin? Do we believe a child is stained from the start? No, I answer, we all start fresh. Well then, they ask, if baptism is about the forgiveness of sins, if baptism is about repentance, why baptize a baby? A baby is incapable of sin. She or he hasn't even got the intellectual capacity to choose between good and evil. All of which is true. But it neglects the reality that baptism is not just about forgiveness of sin, or repentance. It is also, and for an infant primarily, about clarifying and affirming one's identity.

Every time I hold an infant in my arms, I ask the parents, "By what name shall this child be called?" The baptism serves as a christening, a naming ritual. But that name may change. Many of you here go by a different name than the one given you at baptism. It is not the naming ritual that provides the child's core identity; rather it is the public declaration that this child is a beloved son of God. This child is a beloved daughter of the Holy One. He or she is loved now and forever by the creator of the Universe. In baptism a child, is named, claimed, and called God's own.

This past Tuesday morning, Freddie Brenneman and Patty Doolittle picked me up in front of my house at about 7:30 in the morning. Together we traveled down 95 to Stamford. It has to

be a pretty special reason to get on 95 going south at that time of the morning if you're not commuting, and it was. For we were headed to Probate Court, to witness an adoption.

As we gathered outside the courtroom, we were joined by several other folks. Two or three social workers, a forensic psychologist, and of course, the Mathias family: Kim and Mark, who had been foster parents to the little boy they were about to adopt for most of his three years, their daughter Nicole, and Savion Agard, the young man they had hosted through the ABC program.

Every one was very excited. The day had been a long time in coming. And through the many twists and turns of the legal system, it had not always been a sure thing. Mark and Kim had had to exhibit great patience and great faith. And often they moved forward through the process on a wing and a prayer. Literally.

Finally the time came for us to be ushered into the courtroom. The judge asked us all to introduce ourselves. As Kim and Mark sat down next to the judge at the table, Nick was fascinated with the gavel. He loves tools, and kept pointing to it, and saying "Hammer! Hammer!"

The judge smiled, and then got down to business. He reminded Kim and Mark that this was a permanent arrangement. No turning back. Nick would be their son for life. Were they willing to accept such terms? Yes, they both responded.

"And Nicole," he asked, "Do you understand what's going on here? Are you willing to have Nick as your brother?" She hesitated a moment, but then she too answered with a resounding, "Yes!"

"Well then," said the judge, "why don't you take the gavel, Nick, and when you pound it, say 'So ordered.'" Nick was only too happy to oblige. And suddenly, within just a few minutes, his whole life had taken on new promise, new hope. His name had changed. He was now the legal son of Kim and Mark. He was now the legal brother of Nicole. In some ways he had a whole new identity. Kim and Mark had named him, claimed him, and called him their own. And the legal system had clarified and affirmed that.

But while Nick has a new name, while he has new legal relationships, in the most significant and important way, his identity is unchanged. For he was a beloved son of God before his adoption, and he remains a beloved son of God today. And he will always be a beloved son of God. And no one, not even the state of Connecticut, can ever change that.

**Soon, Kim and Mark will bring Nick to our baptismal font to clarify and affirm that reality, but the truth of the matter is, Nick's identity is already sealed. His baptism will simply provide an occasion to claim it as his own.**

**And what is true of Nick, is true of each of you, my brothers and sisters. Each and every one of you is a beloved child of God. Each and every one is of you is loved by the creator of the Universe. It is your identity. And no one can take that from you. Even if you should end up in a shelter missing your social security card, no one can take away your true identity. For you have been named and claimed by the Holy One. You have been called God's own.**

**Amen**

**John H. Danner**