

Date: May 23, 2021 (Day of Pentecost)

1. Texts: Acts 2:1-21; Ps. 104:25-35, 37b; Romans 8:22-27; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15.
2. Subject: ecclesiology.
3. Topic: Christian identity.
4. Aim: encourage, challenge.
5. Proposition: "Our identity as Christians springs from our interaction with the Trinity."

## OUR IDENTITY AS CHRISTIANS

I remember reciting this daily in elementary school.

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America,  
and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God,  
indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Every day we reminded ourselves of our identity. That identity is not militaristic or colonizing. It is an identity based on a collective and society-induced desire for liberty and justice. We told ourselves what kind of society we wanted to be. We told ourselves who we were and who we aspired to be.

Every Sunday we Anglican Christians do the same.

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of  
heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen...

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from  
Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being  
with the Father...

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who  
proceeds from the Father...

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We  
acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look  
for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.  
Amen.<sup>1</sup>

Every Sunday we remind ourselves of our Christian identity. It is an identity based on the shared experience of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We tell

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from "The Nicene Creed", *The Book of Alternative Services*, Toronto, 1985, pp. 188-189.

ourselves what kind of community we are and aspire to be. We tell ourselves and our world who we are.

This identity is not something of our own creation. The New Testament Church didn't sit down with focus groups or gather in visioning workshops. Our identity is not the result of our hard efforts—although the Nicene Creed certainly is. Our identity arises out of the collective experience of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our identity is determined by the indwelling and empowering presence of the Holy Spirit.

It's important that we note that on this day, the day we call the Feast of Pentecost. It was on this day, around the year 33, that the Holy Spirit created the Church. That creation was described in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Today we celebrate the fact that God created the Church and established our identity for us.

Back in the mid-to-late 300's the Nicene Creed was formulated to outline the identity of the Christian Church. They needed to do that back then to determine who belonged and who didn't. The early Church needed to know who it was.

The same is true for us today, although for different reasons. Today we remind ourselves who are because our society certainly doesn't know who we are and even many of our own members are often confused.

North American society thinks of us as a money-grubbing, narrow-minded institution, intent only on maintaining its position in society. Some people think of us as a safe harbour for sex offenders. Others see Christians as weak-minded people who need professional clergy to tell them what to believe. North American society doesn't really understand the Church or our faith.

Some of our own members think that being a Christian means just believing in God as a force for good in the world. For others, being a Christian means behaving well. Still others think that being a Christian means that all non-Christians are going to hell. We remind ourselves of our identity because some of our own people just don't know what being a Christian means.

Being a Christian means having a life-transforming relationship of faith with God, the Holy Trinity.

Faith is a relationship marked by love, trust, self-sacrifice and surrender to the will of God.

That relationship is with God who reveals himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He reveals himself as Creator, Saviour and Guide.

That relationship changes how we live, move and have our being.

This relationship of faith is shared amongst the community of the faithful, which we know as the Church.

Through the Holy Spirit God calls us to this relationship. This relationship carries us through this life and into eternal life.

That's what being a Christian is. It means having a saving relationship with the Father-Son-Holy Spirit. This relationship is established as we respond to the call of God through the Holy Spirit with love, trust, self-sacrifice and surrender. Faith changes how we think, talk and act. Faith unites us to the whole family of Christians. Faith propels us through life here on earth and catapults us into eternal life with the God.

This active, vital and life-transforming relationship identifies the Christian. This faith marks us as disciples of Christ and as members of the Body of Christ.

Now that we are armed with this knowledge of our identity, what are we to do with it?

First we rejoice in that identity and share it with one another. That's the purpose behind our worship—to be our common expression of praise to God for our salvation and faith. In the Church we share our faith with one another and discover that we are stronger as a group than as we are as individuals. You know: the whole is greater than the sum of its parts? Just as the alcoholic finds strength and support to continue in the program by attending meetings, so the Christian finds strength and support to continue in the faith by attending Church.

So, we take pride in the fact that Christ has saved us, and we are his. We are the Church, the Body of Christ and the embodiment of his love on earth. We are the chosen channels of his salvation to others. Through the Holy Spirit, God has granted us the privilege of being his agents on earth. We rejoice in the honour God has bestowed upon us as a community.

Secondly, we share our God-given identity with others. This makes sense. Human beings quite naturally want to share their blessings with others. Not only that, but we are commanded by Christ to share this relationship of faith with others. We share our joy in our salvation. We share the privilege God has given us. We share with others our identity as God's agents for the sake of the world.

This sharing is actually the story of Pentecost.

Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?'<sup>2</sup>

Through the direction of the Holy Spirit, the transformed disciples were sharing the good news of salvation to all who had the grace to hear. They shared their identity as ambassadors of God and members of the Body of Christ.

Today we remind ourselves of our own identity in Christ so that we might follow those ancient disciples. Today we seek to embody in our lives the realities of the Nicene Creed, so that the world might know us as Christians. Today we become the pentecostal reality of God for the sake of his world. For this we say, "Thanks be to God! Alleluia!"

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:7-12.