

“A Prophet from Podunk”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

January 17, 2021 – Second Sunday after Epiphany

Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; John 1:43-51

When someone asks you to tell them about yourself, what do you say? Perhaps you describe yourself by a relationship, your occupation, the place where you grew up or live, or some other aspect of your being: your age, ethnicity, race, sex, gender, sexual orientation, body type, the color or length of your hair (or the lack thereof). When I was asked this by the pastoral search committee when meeting with them the first time last year, the first thing to come out of my mouth was that I was a Denver Broncos fan. Fortunately for me, the people on the committee are lovely, gracious people who were willing to overlook that aspect of my identity and allowed the interview to continue.

But this aspect of my identity, like so many aspects of who we are, is fixed. Throughout my lifetime, I've had a perhaps-misguided, unchanging appreciation for the football team that beat the then-Boston Patriots in their first-ever game on September 9, 1960. Even as my favorite team has been on the bad side of mediocre in recent years, as were the Patriots this last season for the first time in many years, I still love them and watch every minute of every game, no matter how joyous or painful those minutes are.

In today's reading from the Psalms, we read of a fixed characteristic that is shared by all of us, Broncos and Patriots fans alike (or whatever else your favorite team, if you have one, may be): We are all God's beloved creation. We are formed by God, known by God, and loved by God, just as we are. This, friends, should be the first thing on our minds when we consider our identity: Each of us is a beloved child of God, and this will never change!

Our second reading from the Gospel of John also deals with the topic of identity. In it, we read of God's beloved son Jesus calling disciples to change their identities, leaving the lives they knew to become his followers. And in the Gospel, we are told about Jesus' unique identity. In fact, this is the writer's chief concern in the opening passages of the Gospel. While the gospels of Luke and Matthew, in their early chapters, focus on his humble birth, John focuses on the exalted identity of Jesus: He was the Christ, the Lamb, the Son of God, the King of Israel, the cosmic Son of Man, the Gate of Heaven, the great Teacher, and true prophet, even though he was just a prophet from Podunk, coming from the small, insignificant hamlet of Nazareth in the rural region of Galilee. And he was the one who called disciples to witness to the work he would do in the world, and he is the one who still calls disciples to follow him and his world-changing ways.

When we baptize children, we offer a prayer of blessing, saying, "The Holy Spirit be upon you, child of God, disciple of Christ, member of the church." In the sacrament of baptism, we participate in an outward and visible act that focuses on our identity as beloved children of God and followers of Christ. For our children, we pray that they grow into this identity and embrace it as their own, formally in the rite of Confirmation, but more importantly, we pray that they embrace their identity as beloved Children of God and disciples of Christ throughout all of their days of their lives, even as other aspects of their identity may change.

Certainly, many aspects of our identities do change over our lifetimes. We are in a constant state of re-birth, and we redefine who we are every new day. Sometimes, the changes to our identity come from outside of us or are produced by things that are beyond our control. Other times, we change our identity by our own volition.

Such was the case for Martin Luther King, the great American whose witness and work we remember and celebrate this weekend. When he was born, he was not named Martin, but was named Michael King, Junior. His father, Michael King, Senior, pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, changed his own name to Martin Luther after touring Germany and being inspired by the great reformer. Young Michael also took this new name when he was five years old, becoming Martin Luther King, Junior. His new name and identity was perfectly fitting for one who would also become a great reformer of his society.

And the one for whom Martin Junior and Senior were named also changed his name to suit his own changing identity. Martin Luther was born Martin Luder. In German, Luder is a pejorative term for someone with low moral standards, something like “floozy” in English, and so at about the time that Martin tacked his 95 Theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, he changed his name from Luder to Eleutherius, Latin for the “freed one.” He used this name for several months before taking the hybrid name Luther.

For both of the American Martins as well as the German Martin, after whom they named themselves, their new names reflected their calling or vocation: Martin Luther was the Freed One who would work to help the people of the Church become free from some of the practices of the Church that exploited them; Martin Luther King dedicated his life to calling for others to be set free by replacing systems that caused inequality between people with systems that promoted equal justice for all.

This morning, I believe that we are being called by Christ, as his disciples, to join with these great Martins in their work of struggling for the creation of a more just world. This is part of our identity as followers of Jesus, and however we choose to engage in the work of enacting justice and making peace, especially for those who are unable

to experience true justice and peace without more-empowered others struggling on their behalf, we are called to this work as individuals, as a community of faith, and as part of the Church of Christ around the world.

So who are you? You are a beloved child of God. You are a disciple of Christ. You are a member of the church. You are a maker of justice and peace. And remember this: While you are also but an earthling, made from the dust of the ground, stuff that is in your bones came from the sky. As the wonderful Carl Sagan taught us, “The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of star stuff.” Yes, we are not just creatures of dirt, but are made of stars! We are wonderful, beloved, amazing creations of God that are called by God and empowered by God to lift up all that is lowly and dusty toward the heavens.

So let us embrace our lofty identity and calling this day. Amen.