

"Who Are You Really?"
Sermon for the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary Year A
August 3, 2008
Text: Genesis 32:22-31
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You may have heard the story before. All through the night Jacob wrestles with a man who turns out to be God. In the midst of the struggle and strife, Jacob is asked a very important question, "What is your name?," which is the ancient Hebrew way of asking, "Who are you really?" What is your identity? How do you understand your own personhood? Who is your authentic self? What is your name? Who are you really?

It is not at the Jabbok River, during the wrestling match, that Jacob gets asked this question for the first time. It has come up before, back in Chapter 27, back at home. There the person asking the question is Jacob's old, blind father, Isaac. Jacob's mother has dressed up her favorite son in an ensemble she picked up for him down at the Army & Navy store, and she insists that he go for a few days without taking a shower and wearing his Obsession cologne. Why? So that he can pass for his older brother, Esau, and receive his father's blessing. Jacob's mother adds a special dish from a recipe she cut out of *Field and Stream*, a dish only a card-carrying member of the NRA would eat.

Put it together and what have you got? Bibitee-bobitee-boo. Like magic, the plan works. But the question still comes. Isaac feels the

Halloween hair on Jacob's hands and neck; he smells the musky, pungent odor of an outdoorsman whose done a little too much time in the deer blind; he tastes the special stew. But he asks the question anyway, "Who are you, my son?" And the answer comes back, "Esau." Not convinced, Dad poses the question a second time. "Are you really who you say you are?" "Yes I am," responds Jacob.

Jacob lies about who he is. He pretends to be someone he is not. Insecure in his own identity, he trades it for another's. He betrays and sacrifices his own personhood in his effort to gain approval and affirmation. What is it Jesus later says? "For those who want to save their life will lose it, . . . [Mark 8:35a]. In his effort to gain a blessing from his father, Jacob loses himself in the process.

But that is not all there is to the story, as you know. Our God is one of grace, a God who lets us start over and gives us second chances. So in the midst of this all-night wrestling match with God, the question comes to Jacob again. What is your name? Who are you really? This time Jacob gets it right. He answers honestly. He owns up to his own identity. He claims his individual personhood. "I am Jacob," he says to his adversary.

Who are *you* really? Have you answered that question honestly? Have you gotten to the point in your personal development that you feel realistically good about who you are? Have you accepted yourself? Do you appreciate who you are and what you can do? Are you self-affirming? Have you learned to love yourself? Have you appropriated the fact that you are a beloved and blessed and gifted child of God?

I hope you have. I pray you have. You are one of the fortunate ones if you have, because many of us have not. So many of us are still being dishonest about who we really are. We are trying to be someone we are not. In our own efforts to be blessed, we have denied our personhood. For one reason or another, we have never fully completed the process of individual differentiation. We don't have a clue as to who we really are, because we have assumed some other person's identity. We are being who someone else wants us to be instead of who we really are.

Maybe we are trying to be what our parents expect us to be, living out some identity projected on us from our parents' own ambitions and aspirations or even faults and failures. Maybe we are trying to be like our older brother or sister, hoping that the charade just might win the approval of our parents that we never seem to gain. Maybe in trying to meet the expectations of our wife or husband we have sacrificed our own sense of value and worth as an individual. Maybe it is some corporate mold into which we are working so hard to fit. Maybe we are just trying to be like our friends so that we will be more popular.

Perhaps it is the voices of the world around us we are listening to, the voices that are constantly telling us that we are no good the way we are, and that our only hope of being loved is to assume some different identity by wearing these clothes, driving this car, attending this school, earning this income, living in this neighborhood. Or maybe our own sense of an ideal self is so high and so unattainable that we are not giving ourselves permission to be who we really are. It even might be the case

that we were raised in a church that led us to believe God could not possibly love us just as we are, so we have to put on a false face to gain God's care and concern.

There are so many ways we wind up putting on the fake fur of someone else's identity and trying to pass it off as our own. And in the process, we have lost integrity, integrity—a solid sense of personhood, a deep security in our individuality, an embracing of our uniqueness. We have quit being who we really are, who God made us to be.

Who are you really? That's the question that comes to Jacob at the Jabbok. When he answers it honestly, he receives two things. He receives a blessing in the form of a new name. In admitting who he is, he becomes who God intends him to be. Integrity leads to identity. Let me repeat that. *Integrity always leads to identity.* But that is not all he receives. Along with his new name, he has a new way of walking, with a limp. The discovery of true identity is always a painful process, and it will leave you limping a little. It's a struggle, you see—a struggle with God, with yourself, and with other people. It's a lot easier to go on pretending to be someone else. It takes real effort to be yourself, and it often hurts.

Who are you really? I invite you to come to the river and find out. Wrestle with God, all night if it takes it, and prevail. As you come to the table this morning to receive the means of grace, be honest with God. Come clean about who you are. Use *your* name, *your* identity, not one you have attempted to steal from another. Be yourself, not someone else. Accept yourself. Affirm your unique gifts and graces. Learn to love

yourself as God does. Only then, only then, can you receive what God has for you—a new name, a new identity, the opportunity to become the person God has always wanted you to become and will empower you to become. Only then will you receive the blessing you have always wanted and needed, for you will be who you really are.