

Epiphany 2, Year B, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

Who am I?
It's a question
that each and every one of us
has likely asked ourselves
at least once in our lives.

It begins when we're just toddlers.
I remember playing with my nephew when he was two,
making up silly names for each other.
But eventually he would get tired of it all and say,
"I Laughlin!"

In October, my goddaughter presented me with a book of pictures she had drawn of her
important people, all carefully labelled.

Maggie
Maggie Godmama.
Laughlin.
Mommy, Maggie, Baby.
Baby.
Maggie Godmama.
Mommy Daddy Maggie Godmama..

And at family bible study,
I think our most popular parts of the bible
have been the two genealogies of Jesus, his family tree.
Long lists of obscure bible names,
difficult to pronounce, and sometimes funny - like Er -
but they tell us who Jesus was,
where he came from,
and invite us to think
about who we are.

That process of discovering who we are
continues
through the rebellions of adolescence
and the explorations of young adulthood,
and beyond
throughout our life.
Each time we have a new beginning

or a new ending -
a relationship, a job, a home -
we ask ourselves
who are we?
And each time
the answer is slightly different.

There are many things that go into answering the question,
“Who am I?”

Some of the answers
are about demographics, facts and figures, or at least they seem that way.
We define ourselves
according to objective categories,
the sort of things
asked in the census.
I am male.
I am female.
I am straight.
I am gay.
I am old.
I am young.
I am white.
I am black.
I am married.
I am single.
I am rich.
I am poor.
I am an immigrant.
I am American.

We define ourselves
according to what we do.
I am a teacher.
I am a housewife.
I am a businessman.
I am an attorney.
I am retired.

We define ourselves
by our relationships.
I am a mother.
I am a husband.

I am a son.
I am an aunt.
I am a godmother.
I am a friend.

And we define ourselves
according to social norms,
and the way people see us.

I am ugly.
I am beautiful.
I am smart.
I am dumb.
I am funny.
I am boring.

All of those things
go into making up our identity,
all of those elements contribute to our answer,
“Who am I?”

But our psalm today,
psalm 139,
answers the question differently.

“...you yourself created my inmost parts;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I will thank you because I am marvelously made;
your works are wonderful, and I know it well.”

Who am I?
I am made by God.

It's something
that all of us know
at least in our heads.
We've read the story of creation
in Genesis chapter 1,
not just the beginning
that we heard last week,
but the part where it reaches its climax,
on Day six.

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth,* and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.'

So God created humankind in his image,
 in the image of God he created them;
 male and female he created them.

[And] God blessed them.

Genesis 1:26-28a

We are created
 in the image of God,
 each and every one of us.
 But we are not just created by God,
 we are known by God, through and through.

LORD, you have searched me out and known me;
 you know my sitting down and my rising up;
 you discern my thoughts from afar.

You trace my journeys and my resting-places
 and are acquainted with all my ways.

God did not just make all creation.
 God made me.

Who am I? we ask.
 And the psalm answers,

I am made in God's image.
 I am loved by God.

It reminds me of the poem written
 by Dietrich Bonhoeffer
 the German pastor and theologian and activist against the Nazis.
 He was in prison and he wrote:

Who am I? They often tell me,
 I come out of my cell
 Calmly, cheerfully, resolutely,
 Like a lord from his palace.

Who am I? They often tell me,
 I used to speak to my warders

Freely and friendly and clearly,
As though it were mine to command.

Who am I? They also tell me,
I carried the days of misfortune
Equably, smilingly, proudly,
like one who is used to winning.

Am I really then what others say of me?
Or am I only what I know of myself?
Restless, melancholic, and ill, like a caged bird,
Struggling for breath, as if hands clasped my throat,
Hungry for colors, for flowers, for the songs of birds,
Thirsty for friendly words and human kindness,
Shaking with anger at fate and at the smallest sickness,
Trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
Tired and empty at praying, at thinking, at doing,
Drained and ready to say goodbye to it all.

Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today and another tomorrow?
Am I both at once? In front of others, a hypocrite,
And to myself a contemptible, fretting weakling?
Or is something still in me like a battered army,
running in disorder from a victory already achieved?
Who am I? These lonely questions mock me.
Whoever I am, You know me, O God, I am yours.

Trans. Thomas Albert Howard; alt. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/anxiousbench/2014/09/bonhoeffers-who-am-i/#ixzz3PAhC83KJ>

Who am I?
I am made in God's image.
I am loved by God.
I belong to God.

It would be easy to stop there,
with that wonderful gift of the psalm
the affirmation
that we are made
and known
and loved by God.

But the psalm doesn't stop there.
 And nor can we.
 Because the implication is
 that if I am made in God's image,
 if I am loved by God,
 if I belong to God,
 then so
 is every other
 human being.

That's why we have that question
 asked in the baptismal covenant,
 "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human
 being?"

It's one thing
 to acknowledge that we are created in the image of God,
 and loved by God, and belong to God.

It's another to work out how we honor that
 in other people.

No wonder that the psalm says, later on,
 Search me out, O God, and know my heart;
 try me and know my restless thoughts.
 Look well whether there be any wickedness in me
 and lead me in the way that is everlasting.

And this is where it gets uncomfortable.

On Friday
 I joined a group of 20 or so clergy from around the diocese
 who gathered at the bishop's invitation
 to talk about issues of racism, violence, and justice.
 We came from all Suffolk and Brooklyn, Nassau and Queens.
 We were white, black, hispanic, Asian.
 We served in big parishes and tiny ones,
 in hospitals and on diocesan staff.

The bishop had posed two questions for us to explore:

1. Christ addresses our society as it is today with all its potential and all its injustice. How do you see him act? What do you hear him say?

2. What does it mean to be the church in the USA in 2015? Specifically, what are some of the principal ways ministers of the Gospel are called to respond to the culture and society in which we live?

But we didn't get
to the questions.
Instead
we told stories.

The bishop told us the story
of visiting the intersection in Brooklyn
the day after the two police were killed there,
and talking with some people
sitting on their stoop.
The woman said
that she was afraid.
Afraid that the protests
would increase the tensions between police and the black community
and that as a result
her child
might feel less able
to trust the police.
And he told how he had visited the local precinct,
and the police chief asked,
"Are you here to make a speech
or are you here to pray?"
And they gathered some of the officers, and there on the street,
they prayed.

One priest
talked about the town meeting at his church
where they were hearing from a father
whose son
had been shot by the police,
when the priest received an urgent call.
Ten blocks away
the two policemen had been shot.
Would he come?

One priest
talked about wanting to go on protests
but realizing that she needed
to be with the people in her community,

to talk about their fears,
and to talk about ways
they could move forward.

I talked about having a Dad who was a cop
and about my fear when the Patriot Act was introduced,
before I was eligible to be a citizen,
and how I could be stopped by the police at any time
and deported
without any explanation,
and about being stopped by police
and having my immigration status
questioned.

One priest
talked about his work as a chaplain to the local precinct,
and about the fears he has for his sons,
that they will be arrested
for being at the wrong place
at the wrong time,
and the wrong color.

One priest
talked about having a brother who was a cop,
and about how complicated it all felt.

One priest
talked about going on a protest
that was so big
that he couldn't see the beginning
or the end of it,
and about the couple of people who made the news
attacking police
and the thirty thousand
who marched peacefully.

One priest
talked about going into a high end shoe store
with a gift certificate
for a new pair of shoes,
and being ignored
until he finally managed to convince them
that he really was there

to buy shoes.

By the end of the conversation
what had been achieved
was not a plan for action,
or even an answer to the bishop's questions.
What we had done
is listened to one another.
And in a world
that seems to be governed by sound bites,
where we are pushed to be polarized,
we had heard one another.
We had found places of connection
and places of difference.

And we vowed
to continue the conversations,
not just with one another,
but in our parishes.

And so I'd like to invite you
to conversation.
Would you be willing
to gather in a small group
and talk about who we are
and how we experience the world.
About the things that define us and divide us,
yes, race,
but also other things -
age, and class, and gender
and a million other things.
And talk
about how we can bridge
some of those gaps.

Knowing that underlying it all
is that question,
Who are we?

And the answer:
Each and every one of us
is made in God's image.
Each and every one of us

is loved by God.
Each and every one of us
belongs to God.