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Who is Jesus? – Son of Who?

John 1:43-51

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus **son of Joseph** from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you get to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the **Son of God!** You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the **Son of Man.**"

John Lewis, a Congressman from Georgia, has written memoirs of his days working with Martin Luther King, Jr. These books reflect Lewis' deep spirituality and describe how faith, hope, and love have been the guiding principles of his life. In his book, "Across That Bridge, Life Lessons and a Vision for Change" Lewis tells a story from the early 1960's, which I'll paraphrase for you:

One day Lewis entered a restaurant and ordered a meal. As a black man he was not allowed in the restaurant and was asked to leave. He gently refused and tried again and again to order his meal. Finally the waitress brought him his meal. Just as he was about to take his first bite, the waitress proceeded to pour disinfectant down his back. She then poured water all over his meal. The restaurant owner proceeded to spray Lewis with an insecticide intended to kill cockroaches. The owner sprayed Lewis until his skin was burned. All the while Lewis offered no resistance. Instead he looked them in the eye, reminding them that he was a human being. Lewis believed that the sheer act of putting his body on the line, in peaceful resistance, manifested the reality that the love in his soul, had already overcome hate.

Lewis extended love to these two because in his mind's eye he was seeing them as the innocent children they once were. He saw them as one of God's beloved. Grounded in that deep love of God, Lewis understood that the hatred they were exhibiting was a shell, something learned over time. This shell of hate and anger covered their inherent goodness – a goodness equally bestowed by God on all human beings, no matter where they came from, what they look like, or whether they choose to live out that goodness or not. Lewis, like many others during the Civil Rights Movement, choose to see people for their potential – their God given identity - rather than judging them on their externals, or even for their hateful actions.

Our readings this morning focus on our identity as beloved children, called by God, and our response to that call – and they do so, by addressing the identity of Jesus. Psalm 139 conveys how God knows us inside and out and loves us deeply. It's one of my favorite Psalms, because it pushes back on all the times we tear

ourselves, or others, down for not being good enough – as we hear the psalmist's words, "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." The Gospel of John tells the story of Philip and Nathanael meeting Jesus for the first time and of their reaction; Philip's ready acceptance, and Nathanael's skepticism and judgement, followed by a devotion and awe that had them leaving everything behind to follow Jesus. And in the way that scripture has of speaking directly to our contemporary times, we hear in the Gospel reading, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" As Nathanael's words of prejudice towards those who come from Nazareth, a place he deems "less than," crosses the page, the ignorant, hurtful, hateful words we've heard thrown around this week churn in our hearts.

But what is it that makes up someone's identity? Is it merely their origin? The town or country they grew up in? No! Our identities are formed and developed over time, sure starting from where we were born, but extending from there into the different factors and people that influence our growth – namely our parents or guardians and the value system from which we were raised. And as we heard from the Psalmist, even before our birth, our identities as God's beloved creation is at work in us. At some point though, there is an identity that we claim – sometimes even a label that helps to define us and communicate to others who we believe ourselves to be. For example, when I'm at home with my daughters, or visiting my parents or sisters, I'm just Jess – I'm not Reverend or Pastor... when I'm with my family, my identity is derived more from my relationship with them than my title and profession.

Claiming a name or title is a powerful way of stating something about your identity and who you are in relation to those around you. Even in this very first chapter of John's gospel, the author presents a string of other names by which Jesus is identified: "Son of Joseph from Nazareth," "Rabbi," "Son of God," "King of Israel," and "Son of Man." Each name on the list identifies something about the person, role, or character of our Lord. The "Son of ___" titles particularly jumped out at me this week as I was reflecting on this text – especially in terms of what it means for us to claim someone as our parent – whether by blood or by choice. The Son of Joseph title clearly locates Jesus' identity within a particular family unit, in a particular location and time. The title, Son of God, points to the connection that Jesus claims and maintains with God – the one who he calls Abba, Father, in another text. Some argue this term claims his divinity – but I too celebrate that I am a beloved child of God, and confer that blessing on those we baptize into our church – so I hesitate to say that this is a solely divine term. The last of the three, Son of Man, is used to say that something great is expected of the one who bears this title. It serves as a bridge between the Son of Joseph and the Son of God titles, as it connects Jesus with everyone in the human family, even while it lifts him up as unique and special.

These titles, while used seemingly interchangeably in John's gospel, helped me to have an epiphany, or realization, of Jesus' identity this week. While he was born into a human family, and learned to love and be loved by them, he also claims a familial relationship with God – which means that just as I have some of the same mannerisms and personality quirks as my parents, I also have developed my system of beliefs and values based on what I learned from them. In this "Son of God, Son of Man, Son of Joseph" naming, the writer of John is inviting us to see Jesus' identity as a reflection of the divine parent, the human parent, and of that commonality that binds us all together, despite the differences that seem to tear us apart and divide us. Jesus holds it all together as he lives out the love of God in real and life transforming ways... and we are invited, not only come and see, but get to know and follow this Jesus in our own lives.

We, just like those first disciples, are invited to come and see, to learn from and follow this Son of Man, Jesus Christ. We are invited to build our identities around the unfailing love of God made known to us through Jesus life. We, like those who dedicated their lives to seeking justice during the Civil Rights Movement, are invited to live, deeply grounded in the love of God, trusting that our identity, like everyone around us – is that of a Beloved Child of God, reflecting God's heart. As we prepare to celebrate Martin Luther King Day tomorrow, remembering the accomplishments of MLK and those who fought with him in the Civil Rights Movement, I pray that we can do so celebrating our shared identity as Beloved Children of God, celebrating our difference, and working towards the equality of all. Amen.