



The New You

In the name of the beloved Son of God, dear friends in Christ: Every so often I come across a story about someone who wakes up one fine morning, looks in the mirror, and decides they aren't happy with the person they've become. They think to themselves, "This isn't who I dreamed of being when I was younger. And I'm not exactly sure how I got here; but now I find myself stuck in a rut and I don't like where it's leading me." Then and there they resolve to change. They decide to redefine themselves – to become the person they always wanted to be. And they set off to do that, some with more success than others, to be sure; but they'll break some old habits, get a new wardrobe, a new look, maybe a new car. They'll learn a new skill, pick up a hobby or pastime – something they always wanted to do but never got around to. Maybe they'll launch an entirely new career or start a business. Whatever. I'm sure you've heard similar stories. It could be that you know someone who did it. Why, you might even *be* someone who did it: someone who created an all new you.

Then there are other stories you hear about people who are surprised to discover at some point in their lives that they were adopted as infants, and that the people they've been calling mom and dad all along are legally but not biologically their parents. Some, maybe even most, don't find this revelation too disturbing; but there are others for whom it creates a major identity crisis: "I'm not who I thought I was." It eats at them, the need to know the whole truth of their origins. And so they set off on a crusade to find their birth parents, often petitioning legal authorities to open supposedly permanently sealed records. And if they get what they want, and it turns out the parents are still living, then comes the awkward phone calls. "Hello? Is this so and so? Yes? I'm pretty sure you're my mother." Sometimes it leads to happy reunions. Other times it leads to problems when painful or embarrassing chapters long believed to safely closed are unexpectedly reopened. It could even cause trouble for people who aren't involved. A few years back my wife got such a call from a young lady who was looking for her biological father. He happened to be named Nathan Dudley. It turns out that there were four of us living in the United States at the time. Fortunately for me, and saving my marriage from a major crisis, to be the girl's father, I would have been ten years old when she was conceived. Oh, and I also would be of African American descent. So, I was cleared on two counts (thankfully).

Anyway, the reason I'm bringing up these kinds of stories, ones about those who are dissatisfied with who they are and seek to recreate themselves anew and those about persons who are unsettled upon discovering that they were adopted as infants is that both deal with people who are grappling with basic questions of identity. They're trying to find answers to questions like "Who am I? What defines my individuality? What is it that makes me, me?" And, "Am I comfortable with that?" Granted, the first group is looking for the answers in outward kinds of things like personal appearance, behavior, jobs, hobbies, possessions, and what not; and the other group is looking for answers in something more foundational – in family trees and ancestry. But they're both saying, "I'm not who I thought I was or who wanted to be." And they're asking, "Who am I really? How can I find my true identity?"

This morning, in light of today's Epistle lesson, I'd like you to ask yourself the same questions. Who are *you* really? What do you look to in order to anchor your true identity? What defines *who you are*?

Is it your place and role in a family – where you fit on some family tree? Is it your job – what you do for a living? Is it your social status? Income level? Your circle of friends? The things you like doing? The way you appear and present yourself? Your accomplishments? The trophies and awards you've accumulated? Is it a combination such things, or is it something else entirely? *Who are you?* At the most foundational level, on what do you ground your identity so that you can say, "*This is who I am*"? Do you know? I hope so.

For someone who professes faith in Jesus Christ, there can be only one answer to that last question. It's Holy Baptism. But I wonder how many of us would have come up with that answer if it weren't the theme permeating this morning's service. I wonder too how many of us think, "Sure, that's the nice theological answer the pastor's looking for, and I agree it's probably right; but I really don't feel that way in a practical sense."

If that describes you even a little bit, then let me suggest that you really don't understand what Baptism is. And I can understand why that might be. On one hand we are immersed in generally Protestant culture that sees Baptism as a merely symbolic gesture. Most of our other-than-Lutheran friends see Baptism as a religious ceremony that God commands; but that really doesn't do anything other than satisfy a seemingly arbitrary requirement. Some of that kind of thinking surely rubs off on us. On the other hand, Baptism is something we normally experience as infants; and so we tend to think, "Well, if a baby can do it, how significant can it really be?" And over it all is the almost ridiculous simplicity of it: a few words, a little water placed on the head—get out of here! Do you really expect me to believe *that's* the defining event of my entire life?

Yes, as a matter of fact, I do – and not because I say so; but because God does, and his Word carries a lot of weight around here. God's Word carries *all* the weight here—and all the power, for if he says something, it happens. Remember, that's how he created all things. He said it, and it was so. The same is true of Baptism. Though it seems a laughably simple ceremony, because it contains the power of God's Word and his unbreakable Promise it does exactly what he says it does.

What's that? St. Paul tells us that *in Baptism we were buried with Christ Jesus into his death so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life*. Don't let the significance of that escape you. What Paul is saying is that in Holy Baptism God united you with his Son, Jesus Christ, in the most significant event in world history – namely his death for sin and his resurrection to life.

You, regardless of your parents' names, race, social standing, or anything else you can think of, were born a sinner. And you were, therefore, under the wrath and condemnation of God. That was your identity: quite literally just another God damned sinner. (And no, I'm not cursing. That's a perfectly correct use of the term.) But your Baptism changed that. It changed who you are. From the divine perspective, in Baptism the sinner in you was condemned and died with Christ. His death for sin was applied directly and personally to you. The result is that when God looks at you now, he doesn't

see the sinner. That person is dead. God's Law says sinners must die. Okay. You're dead. The Law has been satisfied. Justice is done.

But that's not the end of the story. After he died for sin Jesus rose from the dead. And your Baptism that unites you with his death also unites you with the perfect life he lives now and forever. That's who God sees when he looks at you now: a new person – a person who lives by faith in the righteousness of Christ. That's your new identity.

I mentioned before those people who were adopted at birth. *That's you* if you were baptized as an infant. Whoever your birth parents were, they were sinners. And while you called them mom and dad, from the divine point of view your true parent was the devil and you stood to receive the same eternal fate as him. In Baptism you were raised from the death of sin to become a child of God and an heir of eternal life in his glorious kingdom. The same is true if you were baptized when you were older; the only difference is that you might remember when it happened. Either way, it's a disastrous mistake now that you know who you are to spend any time or effort trying to locate and reestablish a relationship with your former parent, the devil. He's an evil guy who only wants your destruction. You're blessed to be free of him. And you are. He lost custody. He lost all legal right to you when you died with Christ in Baptism. Therefore, don't give him any more legal right to claim you by continuing to live in sin.

This is the main point Paul is making in today's Epistle. Upon hearing the Gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ you might be inclined to reason this way: "Let me see if I've got this right. I was terrible sinner under God's wrath and judgment; but God in his grace and mercy sent his Son to die for me. And now, simply by trusting in the work of Jesus on the cross for my salvation, I'm forgiven and free. Right? Right. Okay ... and now, if I should sin, God continues to forgive me because he's no longer looking at that nasty dead sinner in me but rather at the new person who lives by faith in Christ and his righteousness. Isn't that so? Sure. So, no matter how much I sin in the future, I'm still one hundred percent forgiven. In fact, God actually shows his grace to me more clearly and abundantly the more I sin. And grace is a good thing. So what I really ought to do is go out of my way to sin all the more so that I can receive more of God's grace."

And before you say, "No, that can't be right!" let me say this: it is a perfectly reasonable conclusion. If the Gospel has been clearly proclaimed, it is a logical response. But ask yourself who it is that would make such a conclusion. Would it be the dead sinner in you who enjoys sinning and seeks an excuse to continue in the same, or would it be your new identity as a child of God – the new you who trusts in Jesus, who knows what he suffered on your account, and who now seeks to please him? The answer is pretty clear. So, the real question is which of your two natures do you want to identify with? Who are you? The dead child of Satan or the living child of God?

And that brings me back to where I started: to the person who looks in the mirror in the morning and doesn't like what he or she sees – and who then and there resolves to change. That too ought to be you each and every day as you continue your pilgrimage here below. For while we are in these fallen frames the battle between our two identities goes on, each one trying to assert itself over the other and gain the upper hand. Which one wins is largely up to you. You can throw up your hands in surrender and give yourself over to be a slave of sin; but that way leads to certain death and eternal destruction. Not a good option. You could try to strike some kind of compromise: give in to sin a bit and then try to make up for it by doing something

especially good. The trouble with this approach is that you're trying to have two identities. It's schizoid – a form of insanity. And it doesn't work. A person who identifies himself as a part time sinner is still just another sinner. Another approach would be to try real hard – with all your human effort and will – to suppress your sinful nature. "I will not be selfish. I will not think lustful thoughts. I will love my neighbor as myself." Good luck with that. You might change your outward conduct and appearance to some extent; but inside it's still the same old sinner trying to justify itself and look good.

The real answer lies in killing the sinner in you, putting it to death with all its shameful lusts and desires and giving rebirth to the new you – something you can't do for yourself; but that God can and will do for you as you look to the significance, power, and promise of the Baptism he gave you. That's where you first received your new identity in Christ, and that's where that new identity is renewed again and again through repentance and trust in the saving work of Jesus with whom you can daily die to sin and rise to be a new and godly you.

Let that be your identity: dead to sin and alive to God in Christ through his gift of Holy Baptism. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!