

Manchester United Methodist Church
January 8, 2006 - Dr. Carl L. Schenck
"Under Water Yet?"
Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11

Well how are you doing with your New Year's resolutions? It's the eighth of January already and that means if you're a good all-American, you've probably broken most of them by now. That's usually what happens anyway. If you'll allow me to be just a little bit cynical about it, I'd have to say if you've not broken your resolutions by now, why don't you just go ahead and get it over with? Just eliminate the suspense.

I say that because the nature of most of our New Year's resolutions is just a game, isn't it? It's something fun most of the time, and we have fun with it, but it's frivolous, and it doesn't really mean very much, at least usually. Our New Year's resolutions are not something that are rooted down deep into good soil, but rather they're just shallow roots in sand, and the least little thing comes along and they're gone. They're gone, usually, because they have no root. They're not rooted in our self-understanding. They're not rooted in our best self but rather in our somewhat frivolous ambition. They're not rooted in our identity as people and so they don't last. But thinking about resolutions and identity opens for us this wonderful subject of personal, individual identity. The great "who are you?" question.

First of all, I want to look at this identity business from the perspective of social science. One of the great developmental psychologists of the twentieth century was Erik Erikson. Many of you studied Erikson in school. Erikson was the first psychologist who could see clearly that human development wasn't something that ended when you became eighteen or twenty-one, but lasted throughout the whole of the life cycle. Erikson could envision from tiniest infancy through the most mature adults certain a developmental challenges that each age of life had.

Erikson said the developmental challenge of adolescence and young adulthood as what he called the challenge between identity and role confusion. If you know adolescents and young adults, you know that a part of what they are about is figuring out who they are. That's why young people are often so experimental. They will try things out. They will try out different clothing or hairstyles or even lifestyles. Some of that makes adults anxious and uncertain, and rightfully so, in a way. But it's a normal part of adolescence to experiment to see what fits, what really feels like me. What way of wearing my hair, or what kind of clothing, or what life choices or what career choices feel right. What feels like me. Erikson said that's the project of identity and if it is not successfully managed, the person falls into what Erikson called "role confusion." They don't know who they are. They don't know where they fit. They don't know what they're about. They don't know where their boundaries and values lie. You know people who have gone through life without ever getting their personhood, their identity act together.

There's a wonderful story from the Rabbinic tradition about an ancient rabbi named Susya. He was a great pious learned rabbi. He was the rabbi of rabbis. All other rabbis tended to look to him as a role model, and as a great person of faith. But when Susya became old, and ill, and was nearing his death, he became fearful and anxious. He didn't have that peace that others would have expected him to have. One of his rabbi friends went to him one day and said, "Susya, you shouldn't be anxious as you approach death. Do you believe that the Almighty will punish you because you were not Moses?" Susya looked at him and said, "No my son. I'm fearful that the Almighty will say that I have not been Susya as I should."

Identity . . . each of us has our own identity. Our own sense of who we are. I can't be Pastor

Debby and Debby can't be me. I can't be you, and you can't be me, and shouldn't. For our task is to be the individual that God created us to be. Fully and completely and gloriously as we can be who we are.

Not only does the secular science of psychology look at these identity questions, so does sociology. If you've ever studied sociology, you know that in sociology there's that very wonderful concept of the reference group. Our reference group is the people against whom we measure ourselves. Our reference group is the people who help define how we live, what our values are, what our interests are, what our ambitions are. For us, in American society, very often our reference groups are related to our work. I was at a continuing education event earlier this week and as I was flying back to St. Louis, something happened to me that happens regularly on airplanes. I was talking to the person next to me and was eventually asked, "Well, what do you do?" That's because, in American society, our primary reference group is often our co-workers, people in the same business, or trade or profession that we're in. We come to understand who we are and what we're about by paying attention to the best people, the most effective people, in our trade or business or profession. We refer, we measure, we identify with this reference group. It's not just work either. Our family is our reference group. Sometimes people get enamored with great athletes or celebrities and those kind of people become a reference group, a standard against which we hold ourselves.

Well all of those are secular ways of looking at the question of identity. But we're here today to talk about baptism, and about the place of baptism, in the identity of a Christian. Unfortunately, I think, we don't take baptism seriously enough most of the time. We too often see it as that nice little ceremony that people bring their babies to. I get calls all the time from people I don't know and they say, "Well we just had a new baby and we'd like to have her done." Somehow that doesn't seem to be quite enough. Too often we think of baptism as Mom and Dad bring their newborn, and it's already wet on one end, and the pastor makes it wet on the other end. It's cute and it either cries or coos and everyone smiles and feels all warm and fuzzy inside. Then they go back and sit down and nothing has changed about life. That isn't what baptism is meant to be.

For in the Christian faith, baptism is the marker of our transition from the reference group of the world to the reference group of the kingdom of God. Let me say that again. In baptism, our primary reference group shifts from the world to the kingdom of God. Is your crowd, your group, the people against which you measure your life, the people at work, or your family, or some celebrity or famous person? I want to say to you who are baptized – our reference group is Saint Paul and Saint Francis and John Wesley and Martin Luther and Mother Theresa and Albert Schweitzer. Those are the people that are our reference groups. That's our gang. That's our club. That's our folks. Those are the people that we are to seek to be like. In seeking to be like them, we come to understand baptism. This marker of the transition from the old life to the new is not just a matter of getting a little bit of one end damp. Rather, it is the great transformation of our life.

In that respect, I somewhat envy those Christian traditions that don't baptize babies. The ones that only do adult baptisms, dunking them down in the water. Now don't misunderstand me. I'm a United Methodist through and through. There are many wonderful and good reasons for baptizing infants. Don't start writing letters to the Bishop that your preacher's gone Baptist or something. Just don't go there. But there is something very powerful about being pushed down under the water. Saint Paul talks about baptism this way. He says, "To be baptized is to die with Christ and be raised with Christ." Baptism is the old way of life dying and a new way of life being born. Well, you know, I don't swim and I'm sure that if God had intended me to swim, I'd have gills and fins. So for me to have someone push me down under the water would be a somewhat overwhelming experience. It would be a threatening experience. It would be dying and rising again. That, my friends, that

is baptism. Not, "Can we get our baby done?" No. It is so much more.

A German theologian named Gerhard Lohfink wrote this about baptism, he said, "New Testament theology says that for the believer, death does not come at life's end but already in baptism. In baptism one dies to the old life in order to begin a new life before God. One dies to the old society in order to live in the new society of God's people; one dies to the old gods and demons of life in order to serve the one, true God." ¹That's what baptism is. It's the shifting of our reference group from our coworkers and our families and our celebrities to the saints of the kingdom of God and they become our people.

One of my great saints of the twentieth century is a man named Dietrich Boenhoeffer who was another one of those German theologians. He came to adulthood about the same time that the Nazis came to power in Germany in the twentieth century. Out of his faith, Boenhoeffer joined with some others in a plot to assassinate Hitler. The plot was uncovered and Boenhoeffer and his other conspirators were put into prison and eventually executed. But during the time that Boenhoeffer was in prisoned, he befriended his jailers and they began to smuggle out for him letters to his friends. He was writing poetry and he was writing prayers and those sorts of things. One of Boenhoeffer's poems from his time in prison, that was later published goes this way:

Who am I? They often tell me
I stepped from my cell's confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a squire from his country house.
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 bore the days of misfortune
Equably, smilingly, proudly,
Like one accustomed to win.
Am I then really all that which other people tell of?
Or am I only what I myself know of myself?
. . . Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once?
Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, thou knowest, of God, I am thine!²

Boenhoeffer, in the extremity of prison, could always know that he was baptized. It was the one rock and foundation that would not budge and would not change.

There's a story from the Native American tradition. In it, an eagle's nest falls from a high cliff down to the valley floor. And an Indian warrior found this eagle's nest, and in it there were eggs, and they had all broken but one. But one of the eggs was unbroken. Unable to take the nest and put it back up high in the cliffs, the warrior took the one intact egg and placed it in the nest of a prairie chicken. The young eagle hatches and is reared as a prairie

¹Gerhard Lohfink, from *Theologische Quartalschrift* and *Theological Digest*, 2/15/1990

²Boenhoeffer, Dietrich, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 1953, pp. 221–222.

chicken. Though it's an odd-looking prairie chicken, as it grows up it learns to scratch in the dirt, and hop and fly about ten feet at a time, and maybe four or five feet in the air. It becomes a prairie chicken because that's all it knows. Then one day, a shadow falls across the young bird and he asks one of the older and wiser prairie chickens, "What was that shadow?" The old prairie chicken said, "Oh my son, that is the eagle. The shadow of the great eagle, the prince of all the birds. It flies high into the sky and sees and knows everything. The eagle is the greatest of all birds but you must always remember that you are a prairie chicken." It didn't know who it was.

Who are we? We are the people of Paul and Saint Francis, Martin Luther and John Wesley and Albert Schweitzer and Dietrich Boenhoeffer and Mother Theresa. But each of us has to decide, do we understand ourselves as the people of this world, or are we the eagles of God? Remember your baptism and be thankful. Amen