

**“Faith and Our Signs of Identity”
Sermon by Pastor Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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I want to begin this morning by taking us on a trip to Bradenton, Florida for a moment. Bradenton, Florida is, like many towns on Florida’s Gulf Coast, a wonderful place to visit or even to retire. You are never far from the water in Bradenton. There is always a palm tree in the distance, and peaches are easy to get to, and the larger cities of Tampa and St. Petersburg are well within a 45-minute drive, but the city of Bradenton, like all major cities in our nation, has its share of problems, with drugs and crime at the top of the list.

Heroin, of course, is one of the drugs that has been a problem in our society for at least the past 50 years, and it has seen a dangerous resurgence as of late, but on 14th Street West in Bradenton, they have been on the front lines of the heroin epidemic for many years, with Operation PAR Methadone Treatment Clinic serving heroin addicts there since 1970, and it was there at Operation PAR that I spent a year interviewing heroin addicts who were prescribed Methadone as a functional substitute for their heroin addiction.

Methadone, at that time at least, was a liquid that the addicts would receive each morning, and it allowed them to be free from the most debilitating aspects of heroin addiction. With Methadone, when it is used properly, there is no more criminal activity needed to secure funds for drugs. There is no more use of needles for the injection of drugs. There is, with Methadone, no more nasty detox when the heroin supply runs out or the money is hard to come by, and there is, with Methadone, a new-found ability to function and work in mainstream society.

So, Methadone, while very controversial, has its up side, but the down side, as I discovered in my interviews with the addicts, was first that they were all still addicted to a drug—a drug that is harder in some ways to kick than heroin itself.

Secondly, many of the Methadone users I interviewed could never quite shed their identities as addicts. As one client clearly understood and shared with me in an interview said, “Yeah, I’m off the heroin and working a real job, but I still begin each day by taking my drugs with the same people I used to see on the streets, talking about the same old things that we used to do on the streets. I am still an addict, and I still feel like one”.

One of the struggles for all the patients I saw in the Methadone treatment clinic was how do they change their core identity from drug addict to normal citizen when their lives had significantly changed but not completely, when they had one foot in the real working world and the other still in the streets. How would they ever be able to find a completely new identity? That was the struggle for many of these people.

In our scripture readings from this morning, identity and identity development are central issues in these readings. In Genesis 17, we have what might seem to our ears as the rather strange rite of circumcision. Circumcision is a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham and the sign of God’s covenant with the entire male lineage of the Hebrews. This sign of the covenant was so important that if there were men in the community who did not have their foreskin snipped off, they would be excommunicated.

Circumcision, and these types of ancient practices, may seem somewhat silly to our modern day sensibilities, and while circumcision is still widely practiced in our society today, it is practiced mostly in regards to issues of personal hygiene, but circumcision as a theological issue is very important because it is, at its core, about identity for the ancient Israelites.

So, in Genesis 17, circumcision is not simply a sign of the Israelites' covenant with God (that is, of being a party to Yahweh's promises and requirements), but it is a priestly text which is to say this story in Genesis, this one about circumcision, is written from the point of exile in Babylon. This is a priestly text right from this time of exile for Israel under Babylon.

What is important in that context is that this was a social circumstance when the exiled Israelites were under great pressure to preserve and maintain their identities in a foreign and hostile land. In this very difficult situation, circumcision became a distinguishing mark for Israel. This, of course, is a patriarchal society. It all runs through the male lineage, but the circumcised people of Yahweh were, thus, set apart from the uncircumcised that they lived among. Through this sign, they were able to preserve a very clear sense of who they were and whose they were, so circumcision was not just some sort of personal hygiene trek. It was about who they were and how they kept their sense of identity in a foreign land.

Now, Jacob's wrestling with God is also about identity. It is about a lot of other things also, but we find out that after the evening's wrestling match, there are two things that have changed for Jacob. The first is that Jacob, after wrestling, gets a new name. The name "Jacob", which means "holder of the heel", is a reference to Jacob being born while holding his twin brother, Esau's heel as he comes out of the womb. Jacob gets this glorious new name of "Israel" which means "one who strives with God", so Jacob's identity moves from twin brother to God and God's promises and God's strife. It is quite a change of name.

Along with the name change for Jacob, Jacob is now a man of God forever to be identified with a limp. Jacob's wrestling with God resulted in a crippling, so Jacob's new identity going forth with the new name cannot be separated from the new crippling. A great theologian, Frederick Buechner, has called this event "the magnificent defeat". Jacob prevailed in the struggle with God but walked away limping forevermore, and he limped every day thereafter, showing others, and reminding himself, that truly struggling with God comes with a cost, so Jacob has this new name and he limps around like this and he's got this new identity and new role, and in that limping story is this unbelievable mystery that with God's blessing upon our lives, it always comes with weakness. There is some connection with our struggle with God, God's blessing on our lives, experiencing that blessing and, with it, weakness.

In Christian tradition, we say we follow Jesus and it takes us first to the cross which, of course, is a symbol of death, so our journey of faith has this strange crossroads of struggle in the midst of it. Of course, there was no resurrection without death. There is no struggle without a lasting wound. There is no covenant without an identifying mark. So, it pushes us to think about, as contemporary Christians, what is our authentic identifying mark in our world today.

Many Christians struggle today to articulate their identities as Christians. What is it that makes us and shows forth our faith? I suspect that many of us are sort of like that addict in the Methadone clinic. We have one foot in our faith for two hours on Sunday morning and the other foot the rest of the week in this real world. How do we develop that identity as Christians?

I want to suggest three simple things to begin with in terms of identity for Christians, three simple things that many of us have lost, that the Christian church has forgotten about or stopped doing, but simple things to help us throughout the week, throughout the day, throughout the month to remind us and build our identities as Christians.

The first one is very simple, and it is something we can do every single day, once a day (We can do it more if we want to), perhaps at the dinner table. We can pray—table prayers. Table prayers at the dinner table have long since been forgotten. Think of the power of sitting at the dinner table with your loved ones, looking over the food that they all take for granted, and saying simply "Thank you, God, for this food". What that discipline of table prayer does is it centers our day, just for a moment, and reminds us that everything we do goes back to God. Everything we have is God's blessing. So, once a day we need to reclaim that practice of table prayers.

Secondly, once a week, if we would, take an hour and dedicate it to silence. Here is the hard part. Being silent for many of us, particularly for preachers, is often a struggle, but in our world today, for one hour, turn off the computers, turn off the cell phones, turn off the televisions, turn off everything that distracts us and, for one hour have silence. Perhaps you can read, perhaps you can pray, or perhaps you can just sit in silence for one hour and have a sabbatical of silence once a week. So, once a day we can pray—give thanks to God for our food. Once a week we can just be with God in silence.

Once a month, let's commit a random act of kindness to a stranger. What would happen if we were just to do something nice for a neighbor we don't know? What would happen if we were to say something nice to someone on the street or at the convenience store who we don't know? We would start practicing generosity. We would start practicing kindness, and it is great to see the reactions. It is almost an act of "geekness".

In our sociology classes, they would always have a professor who would say "Okay, your first assignment is to go out in public and do something deviant and write a paper about it". So, people would go into elevators and look at the wall, or they would sing to the top of their lungs in a diner. They would just do stupid things and write a paper about it, but what if we were to do a random act of kindness, a practice of generosity once a month, practice our faith, and work on our identity?

These are three simple acts, done with intention and discipline, that can be the beginning point of reclaiming our lives from the world and rededicating our lives, if only momentarily, to God. It is about the practices of faith, and it is about developing the signs and the symbols of what we believe and then acting on it. So, we are challenged this day. What is it that makes us be Christians? What are the symbols that we bear and live out of in our lives that show the world our faith and, most of all, what is it that we do to strengthen our identity as God's children? Pray once a day. Be silent once a week. Be kind once a month. It is the beginning of bringing our faith into the world and claiming our identity as followers of Christ. Thanks be to God. Amen.