Sunday, January 22, 2006
IDENTITY THEFT
Mark 1:14-20

Identity theft! Those two words are a common warning these days. Someone could steal your social security number, bank account, credit card number, or driver's license and in that way, steal your identity. I recently read a news story about a man who allegedly bought an identity by purchasing a social security number. He used that identity to find a job and later was arrested.

Identity theft is not just a digital crime or even a new one. In fact, it's been around since the days of Jacob and Esau in the Old Testament — a good example of early identity theft!

In a recent seminar on preventing identity theft, the speaker explained that no one is completely safe from it. Those who steal identities do so to access bank accounts, write checks, or make purchases. They don't need much information to do this — names, addresses, social security numbers, and account numbers are enough for identity thieves to wreak havoc.

Some practical steps to avoid identity theft include reviewing your credit reports regularly, checking your bank statements for any suspicious activity, and keeping important documents, like your social security card, in a safe place unless necessary. It's also wise to question how your social security number will be used before providing it to anyone.

While identity theft is a modern problem in our interconnected world, in the original meaning of the word "identity," no one can steal your true identity. You might lose control of a number or some piece of personal information, but your true self remains intact.

Here's the important point: while someone can steal your financial or personal data, you can lose your true identity in other ways — you can give it away, forget it, waste it, or change it, for better or worse. Some people go through life searching for their true identity but never quite find it. I am convinced that one of the most important aspects of Jesus' ministry was how he helped individuals find, recover, or expand their true identity.

Let's look at how we can lose our identity, and how Jesus helps us rediscover or enlarge it.

A little girl, just two and a half years old, was being toilet trained. One day her mother placed her on the toilet, quietly closed the door to give her privacy, and absentmindedly turned off the light, which was outside the room. The bathroom was plunged into total darkness. After a few seconds, the mother heard a quiet voice ask, "Where did I go?"

Sometimes, we can feel like the light in our lives has been turned off, and we ask ourselves, "Where did I go?" It's a universal question for human beings. Many of us ask it in different ways—"Where did I go wrong?" or "Who am I?"

Child development experts say that every child asks three basic questions as they grow up: Who am I? Who are you? and What is the world like? The first question — Who am I?—is the question of identity, and it's a question that needs to be asked and answered repeatedly throughout your life.

Perhaps you've looked at an old photograph of yourself — maybe from your childhood or early adulthood — and wondered, Who am I now? or Where did I lose my way? Life can take us in so many unexpected directions that sometimes we lose sight of who we are.

The gospels are full of stories about people who came to Jesus because they had lost their identity or weren't happy with their current one and were seeking something more meaningful. Nicodemus had lost his identity in his self-centered pursuit of righteousness. Zacchaeus lost his identity in his obsession with wealth. Jesus helped them both recover their true selves. He asked a man who had been sick for years, "Do you want to be healed?" In doing so, Jesus was really asking, "Are you willing to give up the identity of being a sick person for something more positive?"

The gospels also tell of people whom Jesus invited to embrace a higher calling. The passage from Mark that we read earlier is a good example. Jesus calls Simon, Andrew, James, and John — ordinary fishermen — to leave their nets and follow him. These men already had an identity as fishermen, an honorable profession, but Jesus saw a larger potential in them. He invited them to expand their identity and embrace new possibilities.

Many of us lose our identity today in similar ways. You can lose it in your work when your job consumes your entire sense of self. When someone becomes so absorbed in their job that they have no time for anything else, their entire identity can become tied to that role. If they lose their job, they feel like they've lost themselves.

This happens to some people when they retire. Minister friends of mine have warned me about the challenges of retirement. For over 34 years, much of my identity has been tied to being the Senior Minister of First-Plymouth Church. When I retire, I'll have to remind myself that I'm still the same person I've always been, even though an important part of my identity will be gone. I'll need to remember that my true identity is larger than any job title — I am a human being, created in God's image. The same is true for each of you.

There are many ways to lose or waste your identity. You can lose it in the pursuit of power or wealth. You can lose it in a relationship where one partner is almost completely absorbed by the other. You can lose it as a young person under peer pressure, allowing a group to shape your identity into something that isn't really you.

Some people lose their identity by living entirely in the past. They become stuck there and can't move forward. This can even happen to businesses that define themselves too narrowly, like companies that made horse-drawn buggies and went out of business because they failed to see they were really in the transportation business, not just the buggy business.

What is your true identity, and how do you find it, according to the Christian story? If a stranger asked you, "Who are you?" how would you respond?

Years ago, when we lived in New York City, an unusual obituary appeared in the New York Times. It read: "Morris Domitosky, known to many as Morris the Peddler, died Friday in his one-room apartment at 357 W. 29th Street. He was 65. To the police and store owners, he was Morris the peddler, a man who brought with him an assortment of toothpaste, razor blades, candy, socks, and other small items which he sold in luncheonettes and other shops. All year, he wore the same dark cap and green vest that came to be identified with him. As he moved about the streets, he handed out royal titles to those he met. There was King Jack,

Queen Sadie, and Count Mike. If there was no title, his greeting was a simple, 'Hello, human being.'"

Morris the Peddler reminds me of Jesus. He also walked the streets and countryside, giving out royal titles to ordinary people. He made beggars, children, failures, the poor, and even the rich aware of their true identity as individuals created in God's image.

"Hello, human being!" That's your true identity — a person created in God's image. That's who you are according to the Christian story. When you look in the mirror and say that to yourself, or greet someone with those words, you're saying, "Hello, son or daughter of God." "Hello, my sister!" "Hello, my brother!" "God loves you. I love you. You're worth loving. Hello, human being."

It's not always easy to see that true identity in yourself or others. It's tempting to apply narrower labels—"She's a radical," or "He's a grouch," or "He's a failure." With one word, you can squeeze the humanity out of another person and turn off your own.

Even in close relationships, you can forget the true identity of those around you. It's easy to get locked in old patterns, taking the people closest to you for granted and forgetting to see them as human beings.

The smallest gesture can make all the difference. You've probably experienced it — a moment when someone unexpectedly treated you kindly, and it reawakened your sense of self-worth. That's a reminder of your true identity as a human being.

There are many ways you can say "Hello, human being!" to others. A smile, a squeeze of the hand, a personal note, a phone call, an email — each one can remind someone of their true identity. Followers of Jesus are called to be "Hello, human being!" people.

One quality that all saints share is identification. They can see the humanity in the outcast, the criminal, the disfigured, the slow learner, the alien, the coward, and the heretic. This was the kind of person Jesus was. He saw the human being in everyone he met and helped them rediscover their true identity.

The more you can identify with people who seem different from you, the more you become aware of your own true identity as a human being made in God's image.

In a world where people are often reduced to numbers and statistics, it's crucial to remember each person's true identity. I once saw a sign in a hospital that read: "Remember, the chart is not the patient."

Identity theft is a problem. But remember, no one can steal your true identity as a human being created in God's image. You can lose it, forget it, or waste it — but you also have the power to help others recover theirs. Amen.