Sunday January 22, 2006

IDENTITY THEFT

Mark 1:14-20

"Identity theft!" You hear those two words of warning frequently these days. Someone could steal your social security number, or your bank account number or your credit card number, or your driver's license or passport and in that way steal your identity. I read a news story last week about a man who allegedly bought an identity, through the purchase of a social security number. He found a job under that assumed name and number and later was arrested.

sermon..."Identity theft is not strictly a digital crime, or even a new one. In fact, it has been around since Jacob and Esau in the OT" (I thought that was a good example)

In a recent seminar which offered tips to prevent identity theft, the speaker said that no one is

immune from the threat, but there are ways to thwart the thieves. She went on to note that those who steal individuals' identities do so in order to access bank accounts, write checks or make purchases. They do not need a lot of information to steal your identity. Names, addresses, date of birth, social security numbers and bank or credit card account numbers are the types of information, that in the wrong hands, can lead to a person's identity being stolen.

Here are some ways to prevent identity theft. Review your credit reports and make sure everything balances. Review your bank statements so that you are aware of any suspicious or unauthorized activity involving your account. Make

sure you carry no more than one credit card in your wallet or purse and leave important documents such as social security cards and medical insurance cards in a safe place unless needed at the time. If asked for your social security number find out how it will be used and if it will be kept confidential before providing it.

Identity theft is a new kind of problem in today's interconnected world. Before computers, social security numbers, credit and debit cards, bank account numbers and other ways of assigning you an identity, it was not the problem it is today. Furthermore, in the original meaning of the word "identity," no one can steal your "true identity."

They can only steal an identity given to you with a number or in some other way.

However, here's the important point, you can lose your true identity, or give it away, or forget it, or waste it, or change it for better or worse. It's also possible that some individuals go through life searching for their true identity and never find it.

I am convinced that one of the most important aspects of the ministry of Jesus is to be found in how he helped individuals find their true identity when it was lost, and in other cases helped people discover their true identity, and in still other instances helped individuals expand their identity to

what it was intended to be. He can do the same for you.

First, let's examine some of the ways in which you can lose your identity and/or give it away. A little girl, two and a half years old, was being toilet trained. One day her mother placed her on the toilet in an interior bathroom in their home. She quietly closed the door to give her daughter privacy and then without thinking, turned off the light, the switch being on the outside of the room. The bathroom was now in total darkness. After about 5 seconds, she heard a quiet voice say, "Where did I go?"

Maybe you have at times felt that someone or some event has turned off the light for you and in the

darkness you have lost your identity. Where did I go? It's a universal question for human beings. Some have asked the question in another way—where did I go wrong or who am I? Child development experts say that every child in growing up asks three basic questions—Who am I? Who are you? What is the world like? The first question of the three is the question of identity—who am I? It's a question that needs to be asked and answered over and over again throughout your life.

Perhaps you've looked at a photograph of yourself taken years ago, a baby picture or a young child or young adult. Now you are much older. You look at the picture and wonder, who am I? Or, where did I

go? You think to yourself, "I had so many dreams of what I was going to do in life. Where did I lose my identity along the way?"

The gospels are filled with stories of men and woman who came to Jesus because they had lost their identity or didn't like their present identity and were seeking a new, more meaningful one. Nicodemus lost his identity in his personal search for righteousness. He had become completely self-centered. Zacchaeus lost his identity in his all–compelling drive for personal wealth. Jesus helped them to recover their true identity. Another man had been ill for so long that he was now finding his identity in being sick. Jesus' first question to him was, "Do you want to be healed?" In other

words, are you willing to give up your present limited identity of being a sick person for a new more positive one?

The gospels are also filled with stories where Jesus invited individuals to consider an expanded identity, a higher calling. The story from the gospel of Mark which you heard earlier is a good example. "As Jesus passed along the sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fisherman. Jesus said to them, 'Follow me and I will make you fish for people.' And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called

them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men, and followed him."

These men had not lost their identities, they knew themselves to be fishermen, an honorable vocation, but in meeting Jesus, he helped them discover some new abilities. He invited them to consider an enlarged identity. He stretched their vision of what their lives could be. He saw in them possibilities which they had not seen in themselves but now they could begin to see.

What are some of the ways in which you can lose their identity today? You can lose it in your work. Your job becomes your all-consuming passion so there is no time left for anything else. You become

a one-dimensional person. You are defined by your job. Then if you lose your job, you've lost the only identity you have. This happens to some people when they retire.

Minister friends of mine who have retired have been warning me about what could happen when I retire. It will be a big adjustment because for more than 34 years a large part of my identity has been associated with being the Senior Minister of First-Plymouth Church. Once I retire, I will have to keep reminding myself that I am still the same person I always have been even though one important identity has been removed. I will have to keep reminding myself that my true identity is much larger than that of being a minister. It is to

remember that I am human being created in God's image. Being a minister is only one part of my identity. I am also a husband, a father, a grandfather, a friend, a colleague, and more. The same is true for each of you.

There are so many ways you can lose or waste or forget your true identity. You can lose your identity in the pursuit of personal power, or in your desire to accumulate more and more money.

You can lose your personal identity in marriage. One partner can be absorbed almost totally by the other. The danger in all of these examples is allowing one part of your life to become what totally identifies you or in allowing someone or something

else to give you an identity which is false or too limited. This can happen especially to young people. As a young person you can allow your peer group to give you an identity which is not really you. You can come under the control of the group and no longer think for yourself. Peer pressure can be a powerful tool in taking away your true identity.

There are individuals who have no direction or purpose in life and therefore no identity. They have no idea who they are or where they are or where they are going. They wander around aimlessly looking for an identity and sometimes settle for a limited one.

I know people who have lost their identity by living almost completely in the past. They are stuck there

and can't move on. It can even happen to a business that defines itself too narrowly. Companies that manufactured horse drawn buggies went out of business because they defined themselves as being in the buggy business rather than the transportation business. Their identity was too narrow.

What is your true identity and how do you find it according to the Christian story? If a stranger would ask you, "Who are you?" How would you define yourself.

Years ago when we were living in the New York City area, this unusual obituary appeared in the New York Times. "Morris Domitosky, known to

many in Times Square as a kind of walking department store, died Friday in his one room apartment at 357 W. 29th Street. He was sixty-five. To the police and the 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. And if there were 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, making beggars, children, failures, poor people and yes, even rich people be 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, and when you greet another person with those words, you are 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 in others. It's tempting to apply a

narrower label to yourself or someone else. “She’s a radical. He’s a reactionary. She’s a grouch. He’s a racist.” With one little word you can squeeze the humanity out of another person and turn off your own humanity at the same time.

You can even dehumanize those closest to you. Wife, husband, child, colleague, parent, friend. You can get locked in a pattern of action–reaction, a habit pattern, a history of a relationship and you take another person for granted. You forget to see the other person in his or her true identity—a human being.

The smallest gesture or greeting can tip the scales one way or the other. You’ve had the experience when someone surprisingly treated you in a kind

way, with dignity and respect when you didn't expect it. Then your true identity as a human being is re-awakened.

There are so many ways you can say "hello, human being to others. A smile, a squeeze of the hand, a personal note, an invitation, a pat on the back, a friendly phone call, an email;
followers of Jesus are called to be "hello, human being" people.

There is one characteristic which all saints have in common. It is not piety or love of God as commonly understood. Many people are pious who are far from saintly. The quality all saints have in common is identification. Through some mysterious process,

they are able to identify with the full range of creation.

They identify with the outcast, the criminal, the disfigured, with slow learners, with the alien, the coward, and the heretic. This is the kind of person Jesus was. He saw the human being in every person he met. He perceived their true identity. If someone had lost his or her true identity, he helped that person re-discover it.

The more you can identify with persons who appear to be different from you, the more fully you enter into human-hood; the more you became aware of your own true identity as a human being made in God's image.

In an increasingly technological and mass society, where people are assigned numbers to identify them, you have to be especially careful to see other individuals as human beings and not as interchangeable units. In visiting a hospital I saw a sign which needs to be in every hospital. It said, "Remember the chart is not the patient."

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