

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Identity has become a big issue in our world today. Identity politics, for example, people forming exclusive political alliances based on race or ethnicity, sexuality or some modern social construct.

“How do you identify?” It seems an odd question to ask. And not long ago, I might have replied with a Lutheran catechism type question: “What do you mean — how do I identify?” Today many people know exactly how to respond: “I identify as a CIS white male, and my pronouns are he and him.” It seems rather ludicrous. There was a YouTube meme going around earlier this year where presenters at a Microsoft online seminar all began by “identifying” themselves to their audience in this way. They were so serious, absurdly so, which made it so hilarious.

Believe me, when I was in the military, if I came upon a guard with an M-16 pointing at me, shouting “Identify yourself,” I knew he was not asking about my sexual preferences or for my pronouns. The banking app on your phone wants to make sure of your identity before letting you in to see your account, and it could care less whether you are male or female, white or black, as long as it is YOU, and not someone trying to steal your identity.

It's interesting, because words like identity, identify, and identical all come from the Latin word *idem*, which means “the same thing.” In mathematics, that's the way we use “identity.” There is an additive identity, for example, that is, a number such that when you add it to another number, say “a,” you get “a” back — the same number. You know that the additive identity is zero: $a + 0 = a$. Also there's a multiplicative identity, and you know that identity is one — $a \cdot 1 = a$ — the same thing. Zero doesn't get to self-identify as the multiplicative identity. Answer that way on one of my quizzes in my teaching days, and that's exactly what you would have gotten ... a zero.

In mathematics, these two identity numbers are actually some of the most important — to be sure, π or e are important, but 0 and 1 are even more so.

Actual identity is surely significant, and not just in mathematics. In His incarnation, for example, Jesus didn't just identify with man, as people might say today, without any basis in reality. Jesus actually became man — “*the Word became flesh*” (John 1:14), flesh and bone, a mortal. It wasn't pretend; He was.

Jesus didn't just identify with God's covenant people by being circumcised as we heard today, but He was made one of them as He shed His first blood in His circumcision, thus fulfilling God's promise to save the nations through the

offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — through the lion of Judah, the stump of Jesse, the son of David. As Jesus said, “*salvation is from the Jews*” (John 4:22).

Jesus didn't just identify with sinners like some homeless advocates do today, sleeping on the streets with the homeless a night or two in order to “identify with their plight,” but returning quickly to their mansions, their hot showers, and their soft, warm beds. Jesus actually became sin — God “*made him to be sin who knew no sin*” (2 Cor. 5:21). He wasn't just play-acting. “*The LORD ... laid on [Jesus] the iniquity of us all*” (Isa. 53:6). He was.

Luther answered those who would object, saying, “it is highly absurd and insulting to call the Son of God a sinner and a curse!” Luther responded: “If you want to deny that He is a sinner and a curse, then deny also that He suffered, was crucified, and died. For it is no less absurd to say, as our Creed confesses and prays, that the Son of God was crucified and underwent the torments of sin and death than it is to say that He is a sinner or a curse. But if it is not absurd to confess and believe that Christ was crucified among thieves, then it is not absurd to say as well that He was a curse and a sinner of sinners” (*Luther's Works*, 26:278).

Of course, Paul also says, “*he knew no sin,*” and Luther echoes that, too. Luther wrote, “He is, of course, innocent, because He is the Lamb of God without spot or blemish. But because He bears the sins of the world, His innocence is pressed down with the sins and guilt of the entire world” (LW26:275).

Jesus was innocent of all law breaking, whether by commission or omission. The people testified of Jesus: “*He has done all things well*” (Mark 7:37). And Jesus Himself preached that He did not come abolishing or relaxing the Law, but He came fulfilling it (Matt. 5:17-19). And He began it on the eighth day, fulfilling the Law of circumcision; and 32 days later being presented in the temple, the firstborn son of Mary. Then with 30 years of sinlessness, but bearing the sins of the world, Jesus went before the Jewish Council and the Roman governor, and neither could find anything they could hold against Him except the testimony of false witnesses. (Matt. 26:59-60; John 18:38, 19:6). So they sent Him to the cross, but in this way, God's spotless Lamb “*bore our sins in his body on the tree that we might die to sin and live to righteousness*” (1 Pet. 2:24).

For Jesus didn't just identify as savior, claiming an identity that was not true like the man who claims to be a woman, who cannot bear a child, or the woman who claims to be a man, but cannot father one. No, Jesus was incarnate by the Holy Spirit in the Blessed Virgin and given the name Jesus on the eighth day because He was the Savior, Christ the Lord, and He would by His life and death and life again save the people from their sins (Matt. 1:21).

And we, now — you and I — we have an identity by virtue of God's gracious action in our lives, what St. Paul called a "*circumcision made without hands ... by the circumcision [done by] Christ,*" (Col. 2:11), which Paul says is our baptism. By this sacrament, we are reborn and given new identities as children of God. By this sacrament — God's fulfillment of His Old Testament sign of circumcision — we are "*buried with [Christ] in baptism, in which [we] were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised [Jesus] from the dead*" (Col. 2:12). By this sacrament, we do in fact "*die to sin*" and are raised to "*live to righteousness*" (1 Pet. 2:24).

Of course, to be given this new identity in the washing of regeneration and renewal does not mean we lose those creaturely identities in which we were born. But this new identity is now preeminent, and we are no longer called to walk in the old sinful ways, but in newness of life (Rom. 6). Therefore, in a daily remembrance of this sacrament, may we resolve to live in this new year ever more according to our new identity — children of God, followers of Christ.

I close with these words of St. Paul, a reminder of who we are in Christ Jesus, and an appropriate way to begin afresh a new year with a focus on our identity in Christ: "*For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come*" (2 Cor. 5:14-17). God grant it ...

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.