

Emmanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church

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The Baptism of our Lord

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How do you identify?

⁴But when the kindness and love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared, ⁵he saved us – not by righteous works that we did ourselves, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom he poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs in keeping with the hope of eternal life. – Titus 3:4-7 EHV

How do you identify? This has become an important phrase in our society. From pronouns given in the bottom of a person's email to bios provided in social media, self-identification is important to many. The question of self-identifying is so important to our society that you can find numerous articles and resources to help identify yourself with a simple Google search. One such resource comes from the Australian Human Rights Commission. The first question that they ask is: what personal attributes do you use to describe yourself? Following this question is a string of further questions, such as: By gender? By ethnicity? By name? Family Background? By career or job title? By relationship to others? And In how you think about yourself? In this resource, they continue to consider how one's identity effects his daily life. They also consider how one's identity can be overlooked and under-considered.

Many people apparently struggle with self-identification. For this reason some of these resources online help people identify themselves. One article on Medium gives "5 Ways to Identify Who You Are!" Here is the list that they provide: 1. Reflect on your values and beliefs 2. Explore your interests and passions 3. Consider your strengths and weaknesses 4. Reflect on your past experiences 5. Connect with your emotions and intuitions.

If we would continue to click on the links of our Google search, we would see that self-identification is a concern for people. Dear friends, is this a concern of yours? Do you ponder this question at night? Maybe this isn't your regular question. Maybe this question arises at pivotal moments in your life. Maybe the question of self-identification arises at a graduation, a breakup, a job loss, or a milestone birthday.

Today, I want to explore this question of self-identification with you. We dispell false and harmful notions of self-identification that come from our society. Then, we will receive the answer as we find it in Scripture. This answer for self-identification comes from, Titus 3:4-7. Now, let's consider; how do you identify yourself?

As you consider the results from our Google search, you may see that many of the answers and suggestions fall under the premises of what you have done, what you could do in the future, and how others look at you. For a moment, let's consider how these are dangerous ways of finding your identity.

The first false answer is finding identity in your past actions. This false answer can take various shades, all of which are not helpful. Although the things that you have done can demonstrate your values and interests, this can be a poor source of finding your identity.

What makes this a poor way to identify yourself? For those of us who can hold on to guilty feelings, this can make you feel quite poorly about yourself, right? Finding identity in what you have done... Well, do you want to be known by the last nasty thing you said to your spouse? Do you want to be known by the

last time you treated a co-worker poorly? Do you want to be known by your past sins? This can especially be tricky for people who have grievous sins in their past that they wish could be forgotten.

The other reason this is a poor way to identify yourself is that Scripture tells us that our identities are not found in our past sins. Those sins are removed from you. This is as it is written in Psalm 103, "As distant as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our rebellious acts from us." (Psalm 103:12) Your past sins do not cling to you any longer. They do not identify you.

Identifying yourself by your past actions is problematic on the other side of the spectrum as well. The good things that you did in the past are not as good as you may have considered them. Many people can grow proud of the things that they achieved. Maybe it is in an athletic competition. Maybe it is at work. Maybe it is some philanthropic venture. People can be proud of such actions. Yet, those actions are not as good as they may believe them to be. Why? This is because as sinful people, everything we do is tarnished by sin. Scripture testifies to this truth; "All of us have become like something unclean, and all our righteous acts are like a filthy cloth." (Isaiah 64:6) No matter how outwardly good something you did was, it is tainted. Maybe you worked hard to win the game, but did you do it to glorify yourself? Maybe you received a promotion at work, but did your boss see all the time that you were unproductive and lazy? Maybe you volunteer often, but you love it when other people know. Don't find your identity even in the good things that you have done. Finding identity in past actions is the first false answer that people give to our question.

The second false answer is by considering what you might be capable of doing. Perhaps you are already at the situation that you are embarrassed of the things that you have done in the past. You know that you do not want to be identified by your past actions because you don't even want people to know what you have done. Perhaps you are at the situation that you don't want to be identified by what you have done because you aren't where you want to be yet. Often, people are led to finding identity in what they could do in the future. This, however, is another poor place to find identity.

This is a poor place to find identity for a similar reason as the previous. Nothing good that you might do in the future will actually be that good as a sinful person. Sin will always be entangled. God demands perfection in life, not good and commendable in the eyes of the world.

Another reason that considering what you could do in the future is a poor place to find identity is that you never know if you will really be able to do it. Scripture tells us that there is a certain level of folly in planning for the future because we do not know what will happen and we don't control it. This is as it is written, "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go into this or that city, spend a year there, do business, and make a profit.' You do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? Indeed, it is a mist that appears for a little while and then disappears." (James 4:13-14) High school students, don't find your identity in what college you will go to. You may not get in or graduate. College students, don't find your identity in what career you will work in. It may not work out. Employees, that raise may never come. Everyone, do not find your identity in what you could do in the future because it might not happen. This is the second false answer that is given.

The third false answer that can be given to our question is by looking at how other people view and treat you. People around you might make judgments about you based off of so many things that are not truly the best. They may look at your appearance, whether it is based on attractiveness or prejudice that they have about ethnicities. They may consider your personality, whether it is based on your charisma or interests. They may consider all of these things that don't truly define you. Also, they may even have thoughts about you that are not even accurate.

In today's first reading, we saw that God does not look at you how the world may look at you. The following was said to Samuel as he pursued God's new king, "Do not look at his appearance or at how tall he is, because I have rejected him. For the LORD does not look at things the way man does. For man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7) The Lord does not look at things as man looks at things. Therefore, identifying yourself as the others identify you would not be the best move.

How then can you identify yourself? The answer that we seek is revealed to us in our verses from Titus for today. Let's dig into this section of Scripture to receive God's answer to the question: How do you identify yourself?

Immediately before our verses for today, God through Paul informs you that your identity does not come from your past actions. Just before our reading Paul spoke about the laundry list of sinful things that used to identify, but they do not any longer. Your identity is found elsewhere.

Your identity starts with a profound action of God. Paul writes, "When the kindness and love of God our Savior toward mankind appeared." With this, Paul is talking about when the Son of God came into the world to be our Savior. Epiphany, the season in which we are right now, is all about the appearance of Jesus as the Savior. Jesus' baptism, the focus for today, is the occasion in which the public ministry of Jesus began. This was a big moment in the appearing of the kindness and love of God toward mankind.

As we consider what Paul writes here, it is great to think about what the kindness and love of God toward humanity is. Jesus Christ certainly demonstrated this philanthropic care for humanity, yet this was so much more. This kindness and love was more than healing miracles and feeding hungry people. This was more than the compassion with which he looked on those who suffered. This was shown in his salvific work of living under the law for those who could not fulfill it themselves. This was shown in dying on the cross for their sins.

How was this salvific work of Jesus brought to people? One of the ways, as Paul writes here, is through baptism; "He saved us – not by righteous works that we did ourselves, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit." Baptism is a means of grace. Baptism is a vehicle through which the Holy Spirit works and gives a person new birth. God saves people through baptism.

Paul continues to talk about the new identity that baptism brings; "So that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs in keeping with the hope of eternal life." The new identity that is received is heirs. Heirs who receive treasure from their Father in heaven.

Dear friends, you received a new identity in baptism. You are a redeemed child of God. You are washed in the waters of renewal and rebirth. You are one who is justified by Jesus. You are an heir of God's everlasting treasure. This is how you can be identified. You don't need to identify yourself, God has given this wonderful identity to you. You are one who has been baptized.

You know your identity. You are a baptized child of God. Now, live in this identity. In Martin Luther's Small Catechism. He writes about what it looks like to live as a baptized child of God; "It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." A baptized child of God lives with confidence of salvation. A baptized child of God lives a life of repentance. Daily drowning the sinful nature. Daily looking to God for forgiveness. Daily looking to live a pure life of service to God.

How do you identify? You are a baptized child of God. God has given this identity to you. You are an heir of eternal life. Now, you can live in this identity. Amen.