

Column

There are many ways people identify themselves. For Rebekah Baines Johnson, mother of our 36th President, it was: “I’m a Baptist and a Democrat.” These are two options: by your religious affiliation and your political party. Concerning the latter, I knew a man who – on the opposite side from Mrs. Johnson in terms of politics – wanted to be buried with a Republican elephant on his tombstone, and he was!

Another common way people identify themselves is by the work they do. After exchanging names, especially among men, it is not uncommon to hear: “And what do you do?” The response that follows may well be, “I am a lawyer or doctor or salesman.” This man, in turn asks his questioner, “And what do you do?”

It is a good standard conversation opener, but it also reveals something about one’s identity. Who one is is bound up in what one does. This is no recent phenomenon. Take, for example, two common surnames: Smith and Baker. No doubt, the Smiths were once “smiths” in the sense they worked with iron and perhaps fitted shoes for horses. The Bakers, meanwhile, baked bread. Perhaps, there were two Johns in a village, and it became convenient to differentiate them by their trade. In conversation, someone might say something about John. The one he was addressing might well say: “Do you mean John the baker or John the smith?” And so, people began referring to each other in this manner, and eventually their trade became their surname.

Women’s identities, meanwhile, were once bound up with their husband. They would be introduced by their correct social titles . . . “Mrs. George Washington” or “Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt. My grandmother and her close friends carried this one step further. They would address one another – not by their first names, even though they

had known each other for 40 or 50 years – but as “Mrs. Smith” or “Mrs. Jones.

Another way people define themselves is by their families. Once it was common in the American South, instead of asking a stranger “What do you do?” to say, “Who are your people?” A person’s identity was bound up in his tribe or family.

Still another way people identify themselves is by their maladies or ailments: “I’m a diabetic,” “I’m a heart patient,” “I’m a cancer survivor,” “I am an alcoholic” and so on. Such a declaration at times creates a common bond.

There is surely nothing wrong with any of these “identities.” Yet, I want to suggest a better one. This one is bound up in Christ the Lord. It is said of Martin Luther, the great German reformer of the 16th century, that upon arising each day, he would sign himself with the sign of the cross and say, “I am a baptised man.” Surely this is the best identity.

In baptism, we were, after the manner of an outward and visible sign, identified with Jesus. His death became our death. His victory on the cross became our victory. In view of this, why would we want to find our identity in any other thing or one?

May the Apostle Paul’s banner be our banner: “For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Grant, O Lord, that as we are baptized into the death of thy blessed Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, so by continual mortifying our corrupt affections we may be buried with him; and that through the grave, and gate of death, we may pass to our joyful resurrection; for his merits, who died, and was buried and rose again for us, the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Book of Common Prayer)

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