

My first Sunday here with you marks the end of a whole heap of work by a lot of people in this community. As part of the effort of finding your new priest, a tremendous amount of thought, love, intention, and creativity went into compiling and writing the Parish Profile, which was posted to St. Ben's website during the search process. This Profile was the way you all shared with the world 'who you say you are,' who you understand yourselves to be, as well as a little of who you have been, what kind of a priest you're hoping for, and your wonderings about what the future may hold for St. Ben's. I read your profile closely and I loved what I read!

As we discerned together, the Search Committee and the Vestry asked me lots of questions, it was important for all those folks to hear who I said I am: how I describe myself, who I understand myself to be, to hear a little of who I have been, and my own wonderings about what the future may hold for my ministry. All of this was important work, and I'm grateful for the hours and energy that were given to seeing the process all the way through and for bringing me onboard.

And so begins our new relationship, and as we enter into the life-giving process of learning from each other and being changed by each other, I hope that we'll keep asking questions about who we are. And especially asking questions about who St. Benedict's is to the wider community – how is this congregation, this parish, is known, how might it be described (it's mission, it's purpose). What might we learn and how might we be changed by what we find out? I look forward to those conversations.

Identity is important, our collective identity is important – not because any expression of identity can ever be exhaustive, or will ever be fixed, or absolute, this would close us off to possibility and potential –

but because the way we understand ourselves, as a congregation, offers us a place to begin, and something to wrestle with, over and over as we continue to grow in faith together, and reach, together, for a deeper understanding of the reality and truth of God's presence in the world and in our lives. It also helps us assess and reassess our reason for being together, as we continue to be transformed by the love – and the frustrations maybe? - we feel for this place and for one another.

I am a newcomer, and so, like any newcomer, I'm arriving with questions and curiosities and feelings. I'm grateful your welcome, and, at least for a while, I know that I will feel like a bit of an outsider – orientation and incorporation takes a while.

So, as I come along side you, what understandings about our identity do I bring with me? At the highest level I know us to be beloved children of God, all of us. Given we're here, in church, I think it's safe to say we've chosen to be followers of Jesus, and, as Episcopalians, we've chosen an expression of spirituality that is incarnational, sacramental; Anglican spirituality is embodied, and it's liturgical, it places high value on the beauty of worship and on the vital importance of connecting the celebration of the Eucharist to our participation in the transformation of the world through love and service, and the ways we act as the body of Christ to bring justice and freedom for all.

Up at this level of description you may agree with me, but I'll wager that as we go deeper into the particularities, begin to think about defining and naming specifics, we'll find differing opinions: about how to best word our liturgies, about what exactly constitutes beauty, there may be a variety of opinions on what justice looks like and how we might prioritize our acts of service. There is the potential for great difference even within our most enduring and established commonly held beliefs.

And I wonder if this is why Jesus, as we heard in our Gospel reading, insisted Peter tell no one that he believed Jesus to be the Messiah, which means: God's anointed. Those who surrounded Jesus have shared a belief in the coming of God's anointed. Generally, the coming of the Messiah was taken to indicate the end of the present age, and the inauguration of a new age which would have the righteous firmly in charge of things, and the wicked and unjust properly 'taken care of!' But in what way exactly would this be brought about? Here there would have been some difference in opinion:

Some may have expected a military campaign, a warrior King, and the use of just violence to put the world to rights and bring peace, others may have expected a new High Priest, one with extra-ordinary and divinely ordained super-powers to restore the world to goodness. Folks would have differed in their specific understanding of their shared belief in the Messiah. So there was a lot at stake when Peter names Jesus "Messiah."

And so, Jesus orders Peter, sternly, not to tell anyone; perhaps, so they might not be closed off by assumption, or prevented from possibility by tightly held beliefs

Much is the same for us today: we are all formed by culture and absorb its key ideas. And, importantly, as human beings we are also *interpreters* – we have the capacity to make new meaning as we experience the world around us and the people we share it with. It may well have been Jesus' hope that his disciples would take the foundational ideas they had inherited/absorbed about the role and the transformative power of the messiah and *interpret them* anew through their lived experience; have their starting ideas expanded as a result of their lived experience with Jesus - following him, observing him, paying attention to how it all felt. Only then could they come to approach an understanding, as best as we humans can, of the reality and truth of God as it's revealed in Jesus Christ, Jesus the Messiah.

Perhaps what this teaches us, today and in our own context, is that our foundational ideas, the ones that shape our ways of thinking and drive our established ways of being and doing, they're only ever a part of the truth; they are a valid, solid and shared starting place, and they are always incomplete as our meaning-making is ongoing. Our own lived experience and the experiences, the feelings, of those around us must play an integral and ongoing role in the way we see ourselves, our congregation, who we understand ourselves to be, our life of faith, our response to Jesus.

This all asks us to be willing to challenge our assumptions, to hold our formed opinions and beliefs lightly so we might be surprised by what we learn from those we walk with along the way, and not be stuck in what we think we already understand.

Ours is a Living and dynamic God, and our life in God, by with and from God is a glorious, roiling communion of stability and shift, of idea and experience, of the self and community. Whatever we are or know today is only ever a starting point, and today we start – again – together.