

As I watched the events of this past Wednesday unfold on my television and computer screens, I wrestled with how I was going to address the calamity at the Capitol – and then, with prayer and further reflection, realized that much of what I was already planning to say today about our baptismal identity in Christ actually addressed it well.

Think about what motivated all those people who stormed the halls of Congress Wednesday. The simple answer – the knee-jerk answer – is that they were motivated by a fanatical obsession with the current President. But I think it's something deeper – and more disturbing – than that. They stormed the Capitol because, to their minds, all that was happening there offended their sense of identity – their sense of who they were and who, in their minds, we are as Americans.

I think ours is a society that is particularly obsessed with identity. The advertising industry can be cruel in its narrow, rigid definitions of who is “in” and who is “out.” Advertising constantly bombards us, at times explicitly, but often subliminally, with images of who we are on the basis of what we have or should want. Television commercials are forever telling us that we're not acceptable, we're not “in,” if we're too much like “that” and not enough like “this.”

As a result of this, and many more messages put forward by our culture, many people today struggle with an “identity crisis” in their lives. They're lost and confused about who they really are and what their real purpose in life is. The obsession with partisan politics in this country, particularly over the last four years, has been an expression of that. President Trump, whatever you think of his policies, is a master at making it all about identity. When someone, whether one of his followers or someone who is offended by him, becomes angry, it's not just about the policies, it comes down to who, at root, they *are*. They are motivated by how this President makes them feel about themselves – how he makes them feel about aspects of their identity.

I know most of us – certainly I, myself – look upon what happened Wednesday more from the perspective of those who were already *inside* the Capitol rather than those who invaded it from the *outside*. But I don't believe we can frame a faithful response to what those from outside did without deeply reflecting on what made them feel the way they did in the first place. There's more to it than just, “they were incited by President Trump.”

(And before I go on, please understand, I certainly offer this reflection with not a shred of approval for the tactics they used or the violence with which they acted.)

So let's crack this open a little bit. Perhaps a parallel from history will help us reflect on this and see it a bit differently.

A half a millennium ago, there was a movement within the Church that in some ways was parallel to what we witnessed in Washington this week. People we have come to know as the Reformers "stormed the halls of the Vatican" because they were convinced the Vatican had lost its way and had, in a sense, "stolen" what they understood to be the message of Jesus. We sometimes "sanitize" this response with pious words and softer ways of telling the story – but the Reformation was not a "peaceful protest." One of those protesters, the great reformer, Martin Luther, was the subject of much criticism for the ways he sought to change the Church from within. He was often told by others that he was doing it all wrong. But unlike this week's protesters, when he found himself tempted to respond in kind to the taunts of his detractors, he found a way to re-center, re-focus. He would remind himself of his true identity: "***I am baptized,***" he would say.

I certainly have my profound criticisms of the people who perpetrated the act of insurrection we saw this week. Truth be told, like many of you, I am downright angry. So please don't take what I'm about to say as comparing this mob in any way with a theological giant like Martin Luther. But I don't believe we will resolve the issues, the hatreds, an event like this generates if all we do with our emotions over all this is, in essence, the Vatican response to Luther. A "counter-reformation" (as they called their response) will only lead to deeper division and more hatred. If you don't believe it, just look at what the history of the church has been since the 1500s. There are millions who still harbor ill-feelings toward Roman Catholics – and they toward Protestants. Why? Because neither side could place themselves in the shoes of the other to really explore the sense of identity and the sense of loss *on both sides*.

While many on both sides simply escalated the tension, it was Luther who, with that simple declaration, "I am baptized," boiled it down to what was essential. He was a precious child of God and because of this, he saw God as having given him a special mission, a purpose for his life. Sadly, many in the Reformation movement failed to follow his example of prayerful introspection. They simply saw themselves as "right" and the folks on the other side of the divide as "wrong."

In our gospel today, we are given an account of our Lord's baptism. It is, for all intents and purposes, a resounding affirmation of Christ's identity. But think about it for a moment. What is this event really? It is a single scene from what really is a larger movement: the forces of reform striving against the "established order" as represented by the scribes and Pharisees, and the Temple priests. John the Baptist and those throngs on the banks of the river Jordan were "storming the gates" of the very Temple of God.

Here again, however, there was a profound difference from the unspeakable event that occurred this week. John never used violence – and never invaded the Temple by force. He used the power of *words*, the power of *ideas* and of *example* to *teach* and *inspire*. I spoke last week of the difference between Herod and Jesus, and how it was Jesus we now remember, not Herod. Maybe something like that is at play here. With whom, to use the words of our Gospel today, is God well pleased? Those who are seeking to reform our nation with words and ideas, or those who wish to do so by brute force?

One aspect of our Gospel story might give us a path forward. Mark tells us that when Jesus came out of the water the Spirit descended like a dove on him. This strikes me as a symbolic divine action showing that God was out to change the world, not by brutality and force, but by love and peace. The dove continues, to this very day, to symbolize peace. Jesus himself, we acknowledge, is the Prince of Peace, the One who came among us to perfect all of creation in harmony and peace. So, with the presence of the descending Spirit in the form of a dove, we have an affirmation of how God calls us forward. Armed insurrection is not how we do it, is it? It is when we *listen* to one another in peace, allowing ourselves to acknowledge one another's humanity, rather than condemning one another and shutting each other down that we come past the barriers that divide us.

That brings us back to the question of our identity. Are we inspired and affirmed, the way Luther was, by remembering the efficacy of our baptism? Or do we, as Soren Kierkegaard observes, overlook and devalue how much we are, and have been, loved by God? As a follower of Christ, my identity is ultimately about one thing and one thing only, how I can show the love of God to my neighbor, whether my literal next-door neighbor who looks like me or my black, brown, or gay neighbor. My Republican neighbor or my Democratic neighbor.

My prayer for each of you as we process all we've seen and heard this week, is that God's Spirit will work within you, helping you to remember and affirm who you are and *Whose* you are by virtue of your baptism. Rather than suffering from an identity crisis, be confident in your baptismal identity – and serve our God not by inflamed rhetoric or hateful speech but by sharing the love of Christ with the world. That will ultimately make much more difference than the shameful acts we have seen in the last weeks and days.