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Old Testament: Isaiah 43:1-7

But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. <sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. <sup>3</sup>For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. <sup>4</sup>Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. <sup>5</sup>Do not fear, for I am with you; I will bring your offspring from the east, and from the west I will gather you; <sup>6</sup>I will say to the north, “Give them up,” and to the south, “Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth— <sup>7</sup>everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

Gospel: Luke 3:21-22

<sup>21</sup>Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, <sup>22</sup>and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

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Les Miserables is a French historical novel by Victor Hugo - and it is considered one of the greatest novels of all time. Set in early 19th-century France, it is the story of Jean Valjean, a French peasant, and his quest for redemption.

Les Mis the musical opened on Broadway in 1985 and was an instant success. My father took me to New York on my 10th birthday and we saw Les Mis our very first night in The Big Apple. **It was magical.** That was the night I placed a long distance phone call to my mother, letting her know that if she ever wanted to see me again, she'd have to move to NYC. :)

As the story of Les Miserables begins, we see an incarcerated man being released from prison. Everyone refers to this person as “24601.” **He has no name, no identity other than the one the prison system has given to him.** We see him struggling—as so many people still do today—to find a job and a community as an ex-convict. Seeing his desperation, a kind priest invites “24601” to have dinner and stay the night in the parsonage.

“24601” observes the abundance of the household, and takes advantage of it. He tries to sneak off in the middle of the night with a bag full of silverware and other expensive items, but is caught by the police, who bring him back to the priest. The priest, however, insists that he gave these items to “24601,” and not only that, but that his “guest” left without the most precious items—and presses him to accept some silver candlesticks as well.

In light of the priest’s kindness, 24601 wonders who he really is, and what he could possibly become. He sings a song called “Who Am I?”

- Asking: is he really a beast, as the prison system and majority of society have pegged him?
- Or is he a man, worthy of dignity—of food and shelter and trust—as the priest’s actions would indicate?
- **He resolves to give up the identity of 24601 and live into the identity the priest has offered him.**
- He reclaims the name he was given at birth—Jean Valjean—tears up his parole papers, and flees to another part of the country where he leads a respectable life, eventually becoming mayor of his town.

I’m not going to tell you the rest of story, although I truly love it and would highly recommend it. What I am going to do this morning is invite you to think about identity. **Who are you?** Not 24601 or Jean Valjean, but YOU.

**Who are we besides the numbers on our checking accounts, driver’s licenses, and other documents? What makes us who we are?**

You know... Every preacher has his or her particular biases about what the non-negotiables of faith might be; **and these ideas surface again and again in their preaching, no matter what the Biblical text might be.** I thought you might be interested to know what these are for me, so I’m going to share a big one on this, our first First Sunday together.

Who am I?

Les Miserables, like all good works of art, raises the question of what really matters in life. It also raises the question of identity. **Who we are... to what and to whom we belong.** Of course, so does scripture.

The song 24601 sings asks the question, “Who am I...? Who am I?  
Can I conceal myself for evermore?  
Pretend I’m not the man I was before?  
And must my name until I die be no more than an alibi?  
Must I lie?  
Who am I?  
24601.

What is your answer to the question, “Who am I?”

Is it “I am a Gemini/ vegetarian /mother of 3 boys?”

Is it “I am a Republican/master gardener/allergic to peanuts?”

Is it “I am a sister/an alto/and a cat person?”

My quick answer would be: I am a Reverend Mother who gives herself fully to relationships; who loves coffee, Broadway, and Jesus. :)

**Who or what determines who you are?** What specific people, events, or choices along the way have made you the person you are today? **Where and to whom do you belong?**

These are deep, significant, spiritual questions, and worth exploring. **In the life of faith, however, this kind of wondering invariably leads us to one answer: we find our identity in Christ Jesus.**

In today’s Scripture we hear God’s long-ago promises recorded in Isaiah: “Do not be afraid; I have redeemed you. I have called you by name. I regard you as precious, and I love you.”

Faith in Christ teaches us who we are – God’s beloved children. We have the promise of God’s unconditional regard. **Whatever else determines who we are — we have this assurance.** In our baptisms, we were claimed with God’s love. We know WHO we are because we know *WHOSE* we are.

We are God’s beloved children. We belong to God’s family. Baptism is a tangible sign of that. **It’s worth noticing that even Jesus gets — and maybe *NEEDS* — this kind of affirmation.** At his baptism, the voice that comes from heaven speaks to Jesus personally. God says to him: “YOU are my beloved child; with YOU I am well-pleased.”

How often did Jesus, like Jean Valjean, wonder who he was?

- Were there ever times when he, like the rest of us, needed to return to this assurance of his identity, this promise that he was important and loved?
- **Did he ever question whether or not living a life of complete love and self-giving was worth it, given how much conflict it caused?**
- And if he did, did he cling to his baptism as a reminder that whatever happened and whoever he was, he belonged to God?

By coming to the waters of baptism, Jesus humbles himself. He identifies with us. **It is a decisive moment as the identity of Jesus is revealed.** As Jesus is baptized, the Heavens split apart, the Spirit descends and the Father affirms the identity of Jesus. Jesus hears the words, “*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*” **All throughout his ministry, Jesus will define himself by that identity.** It will be the basis for the choices that he makes and will be with one thing that will guide him when all other voices would seek to pull him down another path.

The gospels move from baptism to the temptation of Jesus, to the inauguration of his ministry and mission on earth. Jesus began preaching the Good News, that “*The Kingdom of God has come near, so repent and believe the good news!*” Jesus’ message was an outflow of his identity. He knew who he was, why he had come, and what he needed to do and say. This message never wavered.

Who Am I??? A follow up question might be, WHO ARE WE?

For me, this question cannot be separated from the question: Who is God?

Now, if we've had any Christian formation or education, we've got textbook answers to these questions, right? We are children of the divine creator, made in God's image. A chip off the old block. This sounds dry and formulaic. But it is amazing how many people don't really believe it. They don't believe that they are loved unconditionally, they don't believe that they are intended for good, that God is for us. **They don't believe that God pours out blessing on people with reckless generosity.**

Do YOU believe it??? My friends, hear the Good News: ALL OF US ARE MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE, LOVED, AND FORGIVEN! Thanks be to God.

So that is one of my goals of preaching and teaching: to emphasize a God who is Love itself. **And to remind us that every single person is an image of God.** I find evidence for humans being God's beloved creation in the whole Bible — beginning in Genesis and continuing through Revelation.

NOW: who are *we*, the people of Bethel Methodist?? That's a question *I* have been asking a lot this week. :)

I've heard it said that a first sermon is much like a first date. As your new preacher, I want to do well, put my best foot forward, say all the right things. **I want to impress you, and reassure you that the Bishop made a wise decision in sending me to you.**

To continue the dating analogy, my anxiety is much like that of a "blind date." **I don't know you and you don't know me.** You may know a bit about me, but your only source of information has been hear-say thus far. Stories from friends, or even friends of friends.

So here I am -wanting to appear wise. I want to engage you, to spark your curiosity — but not to appear trite or comical. I'm thinking, "I wonder what they expect of me? What do they need to hear?"

And there YOU are - wanting to appear likeable, congenial, a nice group of people with whom any preacher would love to live, wanting to impress me that the Bishop was really looking out for us both when he sent me to you.

**And we're all wondering... who am I? Who are we? What should we do next?**

To me, St. Paul has the best answer to the question. We are the body of Christ. 1st Corinthians 12 offers a perfect metaphor for the way the church should be in the world. Individually, we can't attain Jesus' holiness and miraculous works. **But all together ... you be his hands, you his heart, you his knees in prayer, you his guts... and, maybe - together - we can raise Jesus up to walk the earth as he did 2000 years ago. . . . .**

The Priest redeemed the life of convict 24601 in *Les Miserables* by NOT handing him over to for imprisonment. By refusing to acknowledge the stolen silver, this Man of God was showing with his *LIFE* that mercy really mattered, **that what he taught in the church and how he lived really matched up.**

And from that moment on, 24601 was claimed for God's glory. Which meant that he lived differently, he loved differently, he treated people differently. **Like the Priest, 24601 himself went into the redemption business.** The rest of the story flows and we see this ex-criminal keeping a promise to a dying prostitute, literally buying the freedom of her daughter Cosette, and then caring for the girl as if he were her father. We see him praying for and going to rescue Cosette's love interest, Marius.

We even see 24601 setting free his own nemesis, the prison guard Javert.

Time and again, 24601 shows with his life WHO HE REALLY IS. And God gets the glory.

When he sings the final reprise of "Who Am I? he claims his true identity:  
My soul belongs to God, I know  
I made that bargain long ago  
He gave me hope when hope was gone  
He gave me strength to journey on  
Who am I? Who am I?  
I'm Jean Valjean!

Do you know what that is? That's the song of someone who has heard and understood the truth of God's words through the prophet Isaiah: "*Fear not, for I have redeemed you, I have called you by name. You are mine.*"

Who am I? Who are we? A beloved child. The body of Christ. Thanks be to God.

***LET US PRAY:*** Holy and Gracious Lord, we have gathered today to worship and praise You, the God of awe and majesty. We have come to encounter the Risen Lord who knows us each by name and who walks with us in intimate love. We have come to reaffirm the blessings we received through our baptism. Through Your Word proclaimed this day, we remember Christ's saving actions throughout history, and we have the opportunity to answer yes as God whispers our names. Help us. Lead us Lord. Amen.