

St James United Church



Message for August 9, 2026 Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

“Our Identity in Christ” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; and Matthew 14:22-33

I am dating myself, but do you remember “Roots”? It was a 1977 miniseries based on Arthur Hailey’s book in which he traced his lineage back to The Gambia, to a young man named Kunta Kinte. There’s a scene that stuck with me. He was captured by slavers and then renamed Toby. But as he’s whipped repeatedly, he insists his name is Kunta Kinte. It speaks of the importance of identity. He clings to his and why not? His name suggests strength, resilience, which he shows in all the episodes about him. More than that, it connects him to his ancestors, and so feels like an identity larger than him, a name carrying spiritual weight. That is what I want to explore today.

Let’s begin with the story of Joseph. Identity shapes what happens, including a spiritual element, him being a dreamer. Dreams in the ancient world were viewed as messages from God and in this an earlier part of his story is key. As you may recall, Joseph’s dad had two wives, Leah and Rachel. Leah had six sons and a daughter, and Rachel had two sons. The sisters’ two slaves had two sons each. According to rabbinic tradition, when Leah was pregnant with her seventh child, and knowing Jacob was to only have twelve sons, she feared Rachel would have less sons than Zilpah and Bilhah, so she prayed for Rachel to have a son. And so God switched the children in utero, giving divine influence in their identities. In addition, some rabbis taught that their bodies but not their souls switched because Dinah went out in public, which only men did, and Joseph was given a robe like women wore. It suggests they were what in Indigenous culture is called two-spirited, having feminine and masculine spirits, and in some nations considered spiritually gifted. Did Joseph’s later ability to interpret dreams perhaps flow from him walking between genders. And is this what his brothers rejected?

Identity is pivotal in too. It begins with Jesus staying back after feeding the crowd. He needs solitude, quiet, to connect with God and nurture his identity as the Christ. Theologian Illia Delio describes the Christ as the unfolding communion of divine love in the cosmos, found all around us, albeit expressed, uniquely and personally in Jesus. In him people experienced the “this-ness” of God. We read this as Jesus comes to the disciples walking on the water. As he approaches, he says, “It is I, do not be afraid.” The phrase “Do not be afraid” often accompanies a divine encounter, and this is one of them. “It is I” in Greek is *ego eimi*, as easily rendered I AM. This is how God refers to themselves when Moses asks for their name. To make it even clearer, only God is depicted in the Older Testament as walking on water, commanding waves and storms.

But that isn't where the story ends. Peter responds to Jesus' declaration with "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." As soon as Jesus says "Come," Peter jumps out of the boat and walks on water. It's more than a miracle. It's sharing identity, Peter participating in what it means for Jesus to embody divine being, the love creating and connecting the cosmos. And we all do, not sharing in the essence of God's life as Jesus does naturally, but embraced by divine energy in grace, making us mini-incarnations of God's love. We too are Christ, as individuals, collectively, part of each other, like Kunta Kinte, joined to his ancestors.

What a gift for us to share in this identity with Jesus, joined in Christ, not just as Christians, but all life held in the power of God's unfolding love. If only we were more conscious of this! If we were, we never would have set divisions between us, making it impossible for slavers to kidnap Kunta Kinte from his home, let alone whip his identity out of him; or for people to marginalize those of us who have our feet in both genders, not to mention belittle women, which is part of the same process. But the external pull of the world's biases is strong. Consider Joseph clinging not to God's inner claim, but the external validation of Jacob's doting on him, evident as he wears his special robe, spies on his brothers rather than help them mind the sheep, and when he had prescient dreams of them bowing to him, quickly tells them about it. Similarly, as Peter walks on the water, he becomes conscious of the wind, thinks less of the divine connection he experiences with Jesus, more of external forces. Jesus lovingly catches him, helps him see again how he is held in God's love, but also invites him to ponder why he doubted, why his mind became divided, drawn not just to God but the world. That is much our reality, isn't it, as we cling to identities the world gives us, and its biases, and divisions stoked based on them?

Thankfully, nothing can erase our identity in God, divine love holding us and flowing between us, binding us together in Christ. That is what we mean when we say we are the Body of Christ. And we can nurture that identity, that connection to divine love, like Jesus. Like him we can take time in quiet prayer, perhaps in nature, and as we do, we draw on grace to help us release the tug between identities, let go of the need for the world's validation and instead to cling to Christ. In prayer, God's grace helps us do this. And it does the same as we worship together, powerfully so whenever we share communion. It too is a gift, especially when the winds of the world's claims overwhelm us. But in communion we collectively cry "Lord, save us" and Jesus is there to grab hold of us, help us experience again the identity we share in him. I often say, "Bread of Life" for communion, a common choice in the United Church, but an older tradition is "Body of Christ." That's what I'll say today. It is a double declaration, affirming the spiritual food that we receive and that we do so as the Body of Christ. I invite you to hear in that your sharing in God's love as part of Christ, and not just you, but that all of us do, and not just here, but everyone, and all of creation, sharing in the Christ.

Friends, the world tries to pull us from our essential spiritual identity, but nothing can ever erase that. No. In Christ, God's unfolding love is around us, and within us, and joining us together, overcoming all divisions and reconciling all things. May we trust that identity in all that we do, in all that we are. Amen.