

“Switched at Birth”
The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 17B)
James 1:17-27

For most of her life, whenever Alice Collins Plebuch saw her reflection in a mirror, she saw a woman whose fire and passion perfectly captured her Irish-American Catholic ancestry. From the moment Alice was born, her father Jim, himself the child of Irish immigrants had instilled in his six children a fierce pride in their heritage, a heritage that situated them in Mass every Sunday and around the dining room table with pints of Guinness.

In 2012, at the age of 64 and on a whim, Alice decided to take one of those mail-in DNA tests. It indeed confirmed that she had ancestry from the British Isles. But it also revealed that she carried the genes of an Ashkenazi Jew from eastern Europe.¹ Perplexed, she peppered her siblings and cousins with questions and begged them to take the taste. *Was there a secret she was missing?* She wondered. Finally, after years of nagging family members and sleuthing through New York’s archives of birth certificates, she learned the truth.

Hours after a physician had delivered her father inside Fordham hospital in the Bronx, he then delivered a boy named Phillip Benson, the son of a Jewish couple. As was common in the 1920s, babies and mothers did not have ID bracelets. Nor were there separate bassinets for each infant. That a nurse might mistake two similarly looking newborns would have been tragic but not entirely surprising...which is exactly what happened to Phillip and Jim.

On the day they were to go home with the women who had birthed them they ended up with each other’s parents. In essence a Jewish boy became Irish and an Irish boy became Jewish, a difference as stark as night and day in the 1920s.² The Irish-American heritage that had shaped Jim’s life and his children’s life was not actually his. As one reporter mused, “was Jim Collins a Jewish man because he was born that way, or an Irishman because he was raised one?”³

¹Libby Copeland, “Who Was She? A DNA Test Only Opened Memories,” *Washington Post*, July 27, 2017, accessed September 1, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/lifestyle/she-thought-she-was-irish-until-a-dna-test-opened-a-100-year-old-mystery/?utm_term=.410055b8aaef.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Regardless of the answer, Phillip and Jim's daughters both agree that it was a good thing their fathers were not alive to learn the truth. As Alice said, "my dad would have lost his identity."⁴ Nowadays, stories such as Alice's aren't so rare. Everyone wants to know their origin story: is what they've always believed themselves to be who they really are?

For James, the author of our Epistle lesson, such knowledge was not an abstract, esoteric notion. It was the crux of faithful Christian living. To James, the greatest challenge to living out one's faith was not an external threat, such as a hostile community or work environment. Rather, the greatest danger came and still comes from within—from failing to understand that we bear the image of God. There may be crows' feet around your eyes, dimples on your thigh, gray at your roots, and a cane by your side, but when you stare into a mirror, you are staring at the very resemblance of God's self. When you breathe in that truth each day there's only so much tomfoolery you'll abide.

To know who you are is to know that you are washed in the same death as Jesus and have been attained the same power over death as Jesus. This power isn't reserved for your death on earth. It's intended for you to seize now. For this power is louder than words. It asks us to lay down claims to our own power and everything else we have built and created. It refuses to sit by in the face of injustice, and it cannot bear the thought of the image of God being destroyed in others. Living into the knowledge of this power doesn't wait for something to change, it seeks God's will and helps make the change. It doesn't regard faith as a Sunday thing, but a daily thing. To know who you are is to know that Jesus' resurrection and destiny with God is your destiny. Do you know your power?

On the other hand, if you forget—oh, you don't want to do that—you forget that all that you are and have is a gift from God. And Craig Koester argues, you'll "[reduce your] life to a quest to get what you can while you can. You may find the situation of the orphan and the widow to be regrettable, but conclude that this is the way the world is, and you need to get what you can while you can."⁵ To forget the image you bear is to assume the life of someone you're not—just as Jim became Phillip and Phillip became Jim.

If someone or something has stolen your true identity given to you at baptism, it's to reclaim it. If you've never claimed it, what's the point in waiting?

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Craig Koester, "Commentary on James 1:17-27," *Working Preacher*, August 30, 2009, accessed August 30, 2018, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=382.

There's a well-known story of a farmer who found an eagle's egg in an abandoned nest. As the story goes,

"[The farmer] took it home and slipped it in amongst his chickens under a brooding hen. When the egg hatched the mother hen reared the eagle chick as if it were her own child. And so that eagle chick grew up thinking that he was a chicken. He pecked like a chicken, he scratched like a chicken[,] he even walked like a chicken. But in time, he grew bigger and it became clear to the other birds that this chick was an eagle. They would swoop down and say, 'You are an eagle, you are king of the birds. Come and fly with us.'

'I'm not an eagle, I'm a chicken,' he'd tell them. 'My mother's a chicken. I live like a chicken. I am a chicken. Now go away!'

But that young eagle chick continued to grow. One day an owl swooped down. 'Get on my back' he said, 'I've got something to show you.'

The young eagle hopped onto the owl's back and the owl flew high into the sky.

'Put me down. Put me down. I don't like it up here,' the young eagle squawked.

'You'll be fine,' said the owl. 'Trust me.' Soaring higher and higher, the owl finally flipped himself over and the eagle fell, plummeting fast towards the ground.

'Why?' screeched the eagle. 'I'm going to die.' 'Just open your wings,' called the owl.

The eagle opened his wings and was caught by the wind. Soon he was soaring above the farm and the chickens below.

'You're right,' cried the eagle. 'I am an eagle. I can fly.'"⁶

What if the next time you looked in a mirror instead of seeing the sags and bags and blemishes, what's failing, who has wronged you, who is more of a piece of work than you, you remembered that God also put on the same kind of body as you with all of its functions and foibles for the sole purpose of fighting for your life?

⁶ Chris Smith, "The Eagle Who Thought He Was a Chicken," Story Museum, accessed September 1, 2018, http://www.storymuseum.org.uk/1001stories/upload_files/text_pdf_208.pdf.

I believe that you might see that your blessedness and ability to be a blessing has little to do with the goodness of your children or the house in which you live or what's in your wallet.

And what if instead of looking into the mirror and knowing yourself against some arbitrary standard of being, you knew yourself according to who you really are— an adored, gifted, and called child of God; a child whose deepest and most lasting identity cannot be contained in a manufactured piece of glass; a person whose purpose whose relevance isn't tied to their past or age or any other self-defined limitation.

And what if seeing God's image in you became the catalyst for honoring it in others, even those whom you most despise?

What if we were not only hearers but doers as well?

What if we became what we beheld?

What if there were no what ifs?

What if "what if" became what is?

How about you go spread those wings of yours and fly?

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