

## Epiphany IV Year A 2026

I remember well my first day of class in seminary. I was driving into Austin from where we rented a house in Westlake Hills, some twenty miles outside the city. I was topping a hill from which one could see the Austin skyline, and the announcer on public radio said that a commuter plane had just hit the world trade center. By the time I arrived on campus, another plane had hit the second trade center tower. The date, of course, was September 11, 2001 when we saw the truth of what the postmodern world was like. Since that event, aside from its historical significance, having official identity has become more and more important. Without identification one is pretty much a *persona non grata*. Without an I.D. one can't ride a bus or an airplane... one can't borrow money, cash a check, receive mail, rent an apartment... one can't get a job... without an I.D. one can't vote... *persona non grata* aptly enough literally means a person 'unappreciated.' And today with the current administration's para-military police roaming the country, one hopes and prays that one's I.D. is sufficient to keep one from being detained, or deported, or worse; notwithstanding the fact that I.D.s enable the government to keep tabs on us.

One of the chief themes in the Gospel of Matthew is identity. That is why he begins his gospel narrative with an extensive genealogy... a genealogy tracing Jesus' roots back through the patriarchal lineage amid the biblical history of Israel. Matthew names the ancestors of Jesus, and he recalls the history of his people, from Abraham, the father of Israel to the succession of monarch's, to the deportation to Babylon, and return, and on into his own day in the First century.... Matthew wants Jesus firmly rooted in the identity of the

people Israel.... He doesn't want Jesus perceived as some new thing, but as the continuation of God's revelation to God's people, rooted in the tradition... Jesus represents, as it were, a renewed, not new, but a renewed articulation of God's relationship with a people whom God has chosen for God's purposes... In short, Matthew 'identifies' Jesus with the centuries-long saga of Israel. Throughout their storied history God has taught the Israelites who they are; who they might become; what their purpose is.... Identity.... And Jesus, for Matthew, is the archetype of this renewed identity. Jesus is the true Israel... the true human.

So Matthew is concerned with identity on several levels: first, of course, the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. He uses term king, which would strike a nostalgic chord in remembering the ancient history when Israel had to some degree, sovereignty, a kingdom... and then the term messiah... the anointed.... Just as the patriarchs and prophets and kings were anointed to bear God's authority... Jesus is the one now... the anointed to bear the tradition forward... and then, the term Son of Man... the cryptic literary apocalyptic figure who would usher in the end times, which would give away to a new and just order... and of course Son of God... again, a term used to describe many of Israel's leaders... the ones chosen to effect God's will among the people.... Matthew is leaving no literary stone unturned. He wants to make sure his audience knows that Jesus is the real deal, rooted in what has come before. The irony, of course is that Jesus is not a king as the world knows kings. His kingdom is one of equals in which vulnerability and empathy order our common life. Moreover, the way of life he teaches is nothing less than a socioeconomic alternative to the world of power, coercion, and violence.

And then there is, perhaps more important, the identity of the people who follow Jesus, the movement.... For Matthew that Identity is found in practice, and moreover for Matthew, it is practice that informs belief.... If, for example, one wants to understand kindness, one must practice kindness; to understand compassion, one must practice compassion; to understand vulnerability, one must become vulnerable.... That's actually classical Judaism... the Mosaic Law was given to the people at Sinai, so that they would have a practice, a means to know their true humanity... and finally, therefore, to know God. That is why the Rabbinic tradition refers to the Law as gift... a gift of identity, a shared identity with their God who created them.... So in the mix of Matthew's narrative around identity, the identity of God Godself is at issue as well.... On the whole this gospel is about what God is like, what Jesus is like, and what God's people are like... an intimately shared Identity, a confluence, if you will, of the divine and human imaginations. And it is this identity that will stand as witness against the corrupted power of the empire.

So identity is what we practice as a people.... Our identity is not what we say, or what we say we believe; it is what we do.... An interesting exercise would be to describe the American identity.... What do we practice as a people? We say we are a nation of the rule of law; Equal justice our mantra... equal justice is an aspiration for our nation; we say we are a democracy... people have the right to vote, people have a say in how and by whom we are governed... we say we are industrious, innovative, entrepreneurial.... But those ideals are always subject to challenge, opposition, particularly by those in power; but we also have a history of racial scapegoating, imperialism, misogyny, homophobia, capitalistic greed, and

violence.... At one time... alas... we were a nation that welcomed the immigrant... in truth, our legacy, the American dream, is founded on the aspirations of the immigrant. So to close our borders, and to deport by quota is antithetical, not only to our practice, but also antithetical to scripture... Hebrew scripture and New Testament. Welcoming the stranger, taking care of the refugee is a gospel imperative. My point is that our identity as a nation, as a church, you name an institution.... Identity is only as true as our practice.

In today's reading we encounter Jesus in the narrative block known as the Sermon on the Mount.... Here Jesus is teaching... on a mountain, we are told by the writer... not unlike Moses on Sinai. Another typological reference. He is teaching his disciples and the crowds following him... what he is like, what they are like, what God is like: The passage we just read is called the 'beatitudes,' the blessings.... So because I took Greek for a whole summer... just enough to be dangerous... I'm going to give you my paraphrase of this passage...

Blessed, that is, loved, are the ones whose hopes have been crushed; the kingdom of God is  
 manifest because of them;

Blessed, that is, loved, are the ones who lament the trials of the world, its evils and  
 injustices; God suffers with them.

Blessed, that is, loved, are the ones who are courageous, judicious, patient, and merciful;  
 because there will always be a reckoning.

Blessed, that is, loved are the ones who have a passion for justice; because justice sustains  
community.

Loved, are the ones who are kind; because kindness engenders kindness in others.

Loved, are the ones who are true to themselves, honest in short; because being true is  
seeing the truth.

The ones God loves are the ones who cooperate instead of competing and fighting; those  
are the ones God can use in the world.

God loves the ones who risk trouble because of their quest for justice and truth; because  
that is the way kingdom people act.

God loves the ones who risk derision and scorn from their neighbors just because they serve  
the cause and speak the truth; people will do this because truth hurts. And there are those  
who refuse to hear it.

I used to believe that the writers of New Testament literature proposed that the Jesus  
movement would at last change the world.... But the world remains the same. The world  
won't change. Power still assaults the dignity and well-being of people everywhere... I now  
believe that the world will forever be the same; power corrupts. But I also believe that the  
Jesus movement represents an alternative way to live, and a way to know and practice the  
true nature of human life, up and against a broken and dying world system. Our practice is a  
witness to the truth entangled with the ways and means of the world... a light in the

darkness, as it were, that, perhaps, has redemptive implications beyond our knowing.... The truth will endure, and we are the stewards of its endurance. We are the signs of God's kingdom embodied in enlightened practice. Our practice is a witness to what is true and good and possible... in the midst of impossibility. Our practice of the faith, good people, is the very means of God's salvation in the midst of a world held captive by greed and power. Belief is speculative and evolving; practice is the thing.

In God's community of equals, there are no *persona non grata*... there are none that will live unappreciated to languish in shame and indignity.... In God's community of equals all will share in the wealth of God's abundance; In God's community of equals all will be safe; in God's world, within a world, all will experience God's healing touch.... Why? Because that is who God is... that is God's identity... to say that God is unknowable is to abdicate our true humanity... God is fully known in every act of love. God's identity is love in the flesh... love in practice... and brothers and sisters; that is our identity as well.... We are that flesh.... They will know who we are by our love. God sees us as people who love, bearing the endless possibilities of Love... and if God sees us that way... then so be it. Who are we to do otherwise?